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SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol 3 No. 13

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Short Novel :

THE ROAD BACK

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Third and fourth generations of Sumedians, descendants of renegade Earthmen, now clash in their final struggle to attain the stars.

(A sequel to "Forgotten Knowledge" in No. 11.)

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DEADLY LITTER

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When the Interplanetary freight lanes are opened up, garbage dumped in space will become more deadly than the Asteroid Belt.

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THE READERS' SPACE

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Edited by JOHN CARNELL

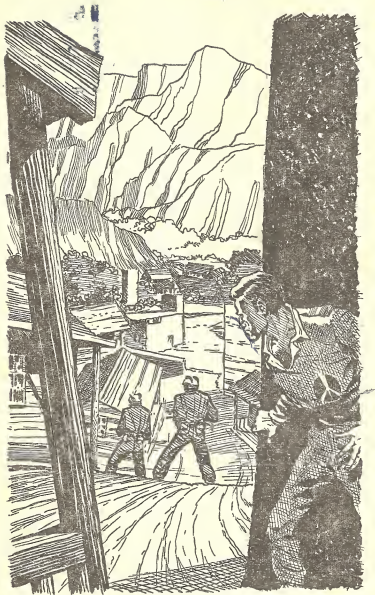
Cover by LEWIS illustrating "The Road Back"

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One hundred and thirty years have passed since the renegade fugitives from Earth's penal colony escaped and founded a new life on Sumedin. (See "Children Of The Stars" in No 9 and "Forgotten Knowledge" in No. 11). Now their descendants, still with the original settlers' vision before them, fight their last battle against each other for the chance to once again ride the star lanes.

THE ROAD BACK

by CLIFFORD C. REED

Illustrated by LEWIS

Chapter One

Hy Jonsey heard the trucks halt before the house, and he picked up his gear, and walked out to them.

"Good rising," the squadman seated next to the driver of the first truck greeted him.

"Good rising," Hy Jonsey returned, and smiled back at the broad-shouldered officer. "Is there a place for me?" he asked. "Or am I supposed to walk?"

Squadman Don Sonjo grinned. "For all the use you will be," he countered, "you could stay at home and sleep. But, since the Lenser Hy Jonsey was named we have kept the worst corner for him."

"And the best for you," the thin-faced lenser commented equably. He hoisted his pack into the open body of the truck, and heaved himself up after it.

Andas Godal, the Sounder, wrinkled his dark face as he shifted to make more room. "Good rising," he chirped, and winked broadly. "It is good to see how the squadmen and their fighters improved. To-day, they have been very successful. Four trucks, travelling from the barracks to my house, lifting me, coming on to your house, and lifting you. At least ten road corners turned without overturning. No person gone under the wheels."

Hy Jonsey nodded. "Indeed, a great improvement !"

Squadman Don Sonjo snorted. "The best improvement will be if the dreams you speaked the Council you have found have half the use you boast they will have." He shook his head. "No. That is too big. For a half of what a thoughtful one boasts of his dream." He signalled the driver to move forward. "I calculate that is why the Jonners have not been able to beat us. Because they have even more thoughtful ones to hinder them than we have."

The two men in the back of the truck chuckled.

"We will give you that one," Andas Godal conceded. He stretched, and nodded several times. "Though, when you see this toy, you may calculate that it is not a toy the Jonners will take pleasure in." His eyes came down to the rifle Hy Jonsey held in his big hands. "That is a very new thought you have," he hinted inquisitively.

The squadman, twisted round to face them, had also been eyeing the weapon. Now, as the trucks rolled through the outskirts of Newtown, on the road for the hills, "What shell will it throw?" he asked.

"Not shells," Hy Jonsey corrected. He hesitated. Then, "This is my own line," he replied.

The sounder's eyebrows rose at this answer. "Your own line?" he repeated. "So ! Your line is the lens." His eyelids drooped. "Do we calculate, then, that this burns?"

The lenser grunted. "When we have done what we go to do," he said, "then we will prove this. Which I feared to do in Newtown."

"Because of the strength of it?"

"Because of that," the thin man agreed. "And also since there is not space enough."

Squadman Don Sonjo stared. "Not space ! How much space does it use?"

Hy Jonsey lifted his head. Before them the road wound and bent, climbing the rolling slopes, to where, fifteen miles on, the

hills began. "From here to there," he answered slowly. "So I calculate."

The squadman's burly frame turned. He, too, stared at the hills. His hand went out, and touched his own rifle in the scabbard beside him on the door of the truck, and he turned back to consider the new weapon once again. "I would want to see that," he commented.

The lenser's thin face remained still. "After we have done," he repeated.

The steam trucks climbed on, slowing down slightly as the gradient increased. The men in the first truck were silent, each busy with his own thoughts. But all were thinking of the same thing. That, if the device worked which the sounder had prepared, their longest frontier might be made safe at last. It had not been safe for fifty years. It had not been safe since they had beaten back the first Jonner attack that had come down the Forbidden Way.

The Jonners had never attacked along that narrow road again. Not only because the defenders were well sited against an invader who must come down a long lane between impenetrable woods and a wide, deep river. But more telling, to come down the Forbidden Way he must cross the ruins of Shiptoun, where invisible death still rose from the earth poisoned by the explosion of the atomic engines of the ship which had brought the first settlers to Sumedin world. So that, after this first invasion was rolled back, and the Jonners retreated to their own territory, many died later.

From the time of the first landing on this world of Sumedin there had been strife between the two factions of the ship's company. Within a year of the landing the Jonners, failing in their violent bid for supremacy, had been driven across the mountains from Shiptoun. For eighty years there was war between the people of Jonvill and the people of Shiptoun. Then, when a new invasion overran Shiptoun, a defender released the power stored in the ship, and Shiptoun, except for those who had already fled the city, died with its conquerors.

That had been fifty years before. Those who had escaped from Shiptoun, coming down the Forbidden Way, had established a new place. They had farmed, and mined, and worked, and built their towns. There was Forgetoun, where their territory began, on the edge of the forest. There was the capital, Newtown, and, on the coast, Seatoun. Here for fifty

years, still under the threat of the Jonners, hankering after revenge, they had dreamed the old dream. That, someday, they would rediscover the principles which would lift them into space. That they, too, would build ships, and, somewhere among the stars, would find those worlds of Earth, and Mars, and Venus, from which their ancestors, the first settlers, had come originally.

Provided, each of the three men thought, they were not overrun before they found the answer. Provided that they were given time. It was to make time that they rode out to-day. To test whether the new thought that the sounder Andas Godal had dreamed would truly give them safety along the mountain frontier they shared with the Jonners.

"It worked in the shop," the small Andas Godal reassured himself.

If it worked there it should work in the hills where it needed to work. If it worked, if it saved them the men the hills took for guarding, if it truly held the Jonners back, then they would at last be free. Free to think, to find. Free to climb off this world, which once they were free of it, they would then be content to call home. But which, until they could leave, as the people of those distant worlds of Earth could leave their worlds, they could not help hating. Seeing it as a prison. Not as their own world. Thinking of themselves as exiles from their proper place. Thinking of worlds they had never seen as their true homes. Worlds of which they knew only from words handed down. Which might be among the closer stars they saw when the dark came at the end of each day, and they looked up into the sky, or far beyond those stars they could see.

Andas Godal's eyes came back to the strange rifle the lenser held. "That new thought," he mused. "There will be power in that. A different power to the power I have dreamed. Will Hy Jonsey's power be the one to lift Newtown up? As mine will not."

His mouth quirked. "How many dream, I wonder, of uncovering the power we seek? As I, also, have dreamed. To find their dream empty, as I have found. To know it is not the true dream. That that is for another to uncover." His eyelids moved down, hiding his thoughts in case the others should know what was in his mind. "I should not beef at that," he chastised himself. "For if my dream gives another

the time to dream true, then *I* will know that my dream was true for that, and I will be glad enough."

In the seat beside the driver the squadman was also considering the new weapon. But from a different angle.

How can we be sure that we shall ever reach the stars? Squadman Don Sonjo asked himself. Shiptoun's first settlers, who *came* from the stars, could not do it. In Shiptoun's eighty years they got no farther. Yet all men calculate that *we* cannot fail. How do they calculate in this way? What sharp man would toss his life on such a tale? Certainly not Don Sonjo! No. Maybe, some day, long after we are dug in, someone will stumble on the right dream. Maybe not.

A sharp man can calculate that this is not his worry what may come after he is dug in. A sharp man will ask what will be biggest for him where and when he is. A sharp man will use his eyes for anything which can help to make him big. Like this new thought of the lenser. That he speaks will hit as far as the hills. That is real. With that, if it works—!

Speak that the sounder's dream works, also, making the hills a proper wall the Jonners cannot cross. Then what? Sit behind this wall while the thoughtful ones dream piddle after piddle of toys, and the ordinary fools clap one another on the shoulder, and babble that any day we will wake and find we can rise!

No! If the sounder's dream works, so the Jonners cannot pass, and if the lenser's rifle works, then gather the squads, give each a lenser rifle, and deal with the Jonners for all time. A squadman who took the Jonners off our backs would be a big man. Bigger than any thoughtful one. He would be the biggest man whatever came after that. Even the rising. Because he would be so big he would be the one to speak how the rising should be held.

If the lenser's rifle worked as he speaked it would. If it did not work—! Squadman Don Sonjo's mouth hardened. If it did not then this lenser would have good reason to regret that he had speaked so big to Don Sonjo. Very good reason.

Unaware of what was passing through the squadman's mind Hy Jonsey sat with the rifle between his knees. Life made strange twists. He had dreamed of a new thought that would give them the rising, and he had uncovered a rifle.

He shook his head. It was not sure that this new thought would work only for a rifle. But he did not get how else it

could work. Not yet. Maybe given time, he would dream of another way to come to what he wanted. Jone Heng, only last dark, had speaked comfort on that line.

He smiled warmly at the recollection. That was how Jone Heng would speak. Always she would search for words that would lift a man. Never speak to kick away one's dream.

His mind leaped away from his problem to dwell on the medicine woman. On the her within that was true to the her one's eyes saw and worshipped. His head lifted towards the peaks they approached, and he made a promise to himself. When they returned to Newtoun after this day's work he would speak to her of another dream. Perhaps she would lift him higher than a man might expect to be lifted. Perhaps. Perhaps.

He sat, filled with pleasant hope, as the trucks threaded their way between the first hills, climbing towards the higher range beyond and the frontier.

At the end of another hour they halted, and the soldiers and the two men of thought descended. The equipment the sounder had brought was distributed among them, and the party tramped on up the broken slopes the trucks could not negotiate. Until they arrived at the look-out post, and the dozen men who guarded it.

It was in no fashion different from the many other posts strung along the range. It was a level space above a possible point of ascent from the valley, and it was a drain on Newtoun's manpower. As was every other such point where the enemy could climb. Which must be watched, in the light and in the dark, in case the Jonners flung their forces at this spot, hoping to break through.

Beyond was no one's ground, falling away steeply, boulder embedded, harsh, and dangerous. Rising again, on the other side of the valley, to a similar range to that on which they stood. That range was Jonner ground.

"Well?" Squadman Don Sonjo demanded.

Andas Godal walked past him, to the lip of the platform, stood thoughtfully weighing up the features around them. Saying nothing.

"Well?" the squadman repeated.

Andas Godal turned. "They could climb here," he murmured. "But, fifty paces either hand, and no one could climb. Is the road to be closed? Or is it left open, to wait for them to try?"

The squadman smiled. "Open. For that cause. So that your dream will kill as many that try, before they get that it is closed."

The counter nodded, not happily.

Squadman Don Sonjo put his head on one side. "Before one lets oneself sleep," he said softly, "one makes sure the lock works. Even if a thoughtful one speaks it will work."

"Where will you make sure?" the small man answered, not taking offence at the other's tone.

There was no hesitation on the squadman's part. He pointed across the ravine. "There. In that crack. Where the Jonners have *their* post. Where they are watching us now, calculating what we do." He smiled a hard smile. "All Newtown gets how Andas Godal calculated. That the Jonners would not be for war if we speaked we were for friends."

"That is my speak," the small man agreed.

Squadman Don Sonjo scowled. "And here, now, is the Council speak," he grated. "That your dream, if it works, must be for fighter work. Prove it, then, here and now."

Again Andas Godal nodded. There was Hy Jonsey noted, an air about him. As though the man had emptied himself, making his spirit nothing, making himself only hands and feet that heard what was commanded, and obeyed. As a machine obeyed, as a tool did, that had no mind of its own.

The tool that was Andas Godal went back to where the equipment had been stacked. "That." He touched one case. "And that. And the small box beyond. Place them by the edge."

He walked back to the lip, kneeled beside the cases as they were set down, opened them, connecting tubes and wires. Sat back on his heels staring across the gap. Shifted the cases slightly. Now all three stood in line. In line, also, with the crack in the rock that Squadman Don Sonjo had indicated from which the Jonners watched across five miles of empty air.

The sounder unhooked a catch in the side of the third case, the one next the lip. The side of the case hinged down, uncovering a trumpet mouth.

"It throws the sound?" Hy Jonsey had followed Andas Godal's moves, one craftsman respectful of the work of his peer in another field. "How great is the sound?"

"To us, there is nothing," Andas Godal told him. "Even the beasts cannot hear this sound, and they hear some we do not." His eyes flickered, betraying the tormented man inside

the shell which obeyed the word of the Council. "But, so one could speak, the stones there will hear it."

Squadman Don Sonjo rubbed his chin. Why could not these thoughtful ones speak plain? He took a step forward. "When do we see this?" he demanded. "Or do we wait for the Jonners to take back word that we waste time with a new thought that is only a toy?"

The sounder did not answer. But his fingers moved on the studs standing proud of the second box.

A sharp crack from across the valley jerked all their heads round. The fault in the cliff on the other side was widening. The split was running up. The edges of the gap were folding. Fragments, forced off, spun in the air. Rocks as large as a worker's house drifted out from the cliff face, seemed to float towards the valley. Everything, from where they stood, moved slowly. That was the distance.

The rumble of the break-up smashed at their ears. This sound they *could* hear. Dust exploded out from the bottom of the crack, as the face of the cliff above the platform crashed down, hiding everything.

"It is enough," Andas Godal said on a flat note, and his fingers moved upon the studs of the second box. "There will be no life there now."

There was a shine on the sounder's face, Hy Jonsey saw. Also a pulse beat in the small man's cheek.

So that, the lenser thought, was how one looked when one killed. Without heat. Without pity.

The dust was clearing now, and the squadman lifted his glass and sighted. Stood, body rigid, arms tense, while the rest were silent. None of the others wished to lift their own lenses, to inspect in details things mercifully hidden by distance. Not Hy Jonsey. Certainly not the small sounder, who had risen, and moved away; looking, not across the valley, but down it, at the bare, rocky emptiness, until his trembling left him.

Hy Jonsey, guessing at these feelings, waited in silence. He, too, faced down the valley. But, unlike Andas Godal, his eyes taking in what lay below. So that, when a distant speck moved into sight on the floor of the valley, his hands moved at once to lift his lenses from his belt, and bring that speck into proper vision.

Beside him the squadman snorted. "As it should be," he gloated. "When the Jonners come to learn why this post

sends no word, they will not calculate anything except the stones fell of themselves." He became aware that the man beside him was not listening ; was, in fact, intent on something else. "What do you see ?" he snapped.

"A man," Hy Jonsey answered. Without removing the glasses from his eyes, "A Jonner."

"Doing what ?" Squadman Don Sonjo swung his lens round. "Where ?" He raked the area. "Ah ! I have him." He paused. Then, "What hunts him ?" he questioned.

They heard a shot, another. Saw one shell burst near the hunted man. Followed his movements as he darted for another shelter.

"What squad hunts him ?" Don Sonjo muttered. "I have not heard of any squad working across the hills."

"Not our squads." Hy Jonsey had the pursuit in his glass now. "It is Jonners who hunt this Jonner."

The squadman's rejection of such nonsense was instant. "Of all crazy speak !" he snapped. Then, as he also caught the hunters in his glass, was silent. For a long space. While the quarry below, keeping a larger rock between him and those who sought him, broke into a run, bent low. To swerve as he was seen, and another shell spat past his head. To plunge behind another rock. To aim his own weapon, and fire back at those who drove him down the valley. Not hitting them.

"Why should they hunt him ?" the squadman demanded.

"He edges this way," Andas Godal offered. "To our side." He looked at the squadman. "Can it happen that he is a scout of ours ?" he asked.

Carefully Don Sonjo brought the fugitive's face into proper vision, studied it. Then shook his head. "No. He has a Jonner face. We have no scouts so." Deliberately he put his lens back in his belt, unslung his rifle. "When he is near enough," he said. "Or, if they hit him, when they arrive to make sure."

The two thoughtful ones exchanged glances. Then the lenser lifted his own weapon. "Here is a better way," he said. "This one, if we save him, may speak of what will help Newtown."

The squadman looked at the rifle the thin man held, looked back into the valley. "He cannot climb to here, in the open, with them sighting on him," he said. "With that—" he flicked a finger at Hy Jonsey's rifle, "can you reach them ?"

He stepped forward with the lenser to the edge of the platform. Stood, eagerly, as Hy Jonsey kneeled. "Twice what I can strike with mine," he commented. He grinned, bringing his glass up once more. "By that, they will not strike back. If you have not speaked too big, their faces will be good to see."

Hy Jonsey's head came up. "That pleases you," he snarled.

The squadman's smile was wiped away. "I do not like your voice," he announced.

"And I do not like this," the thin man returned. "So close your gurk's face while I do what you would like doing."

The long muzzle of the rifle titled down, inched sideways, stopped, steadied. There was a streak in the still air, a thin line of brightness. A small, distant form, crouching on the valley floor, was flung back from the rock where it had sheltered. Lay still. The muzzle moved, and steadied. Twice. There were two more lines of white fire, and two more forms that lay motionless. That was all.

Chapter Two

From his position behind the rock Dillon Dillun Ho stared up at the figures of the Shippers on the slopes. This was not how they had planned it in Jonville. To attract the attention of the Shippers by their firing, to play that he was being hunted by his own kind. That part had surely gone well. But—not this ending. Not the men of his own clan lying dead because the Shippers had a rifle which could kill over such a distance. Killing those who should still have been alive, firing deliberately a little wild, while he clambered up the hill to find "sanctuary" with the enemy.

His hand shook in spite of himself. Against such a weapon the Jonners could not hope to win the war that was being planned. The war which was the reason for the pursuit they had staged, for his presence here behind this rock.

His eyes flickered up and down the valley. What odds was it that he could reach the overhang where he would be out of sight of the Shippers. Not good. But, he would have to try. Before he, also, was dead.

He drew his legs under him. If he swerved often enough ! He tensed.

Then held it. One of the Shippers was waving. Beckoning. Pointing to the way up, and signalling him to climb. He hesitated. Suppose they played with him? Wanting him to climb until he almost reached the top. Then—fired. To watch his body fall, and roll, flapping and breaking, down the slope to the bottom.

A fine joke that would be with the crazy Jonner.

Well, that was what had been the odds when they spoke of this work in Jonville. And he had answered that he would toss on those odds. Which were not changed because the three who lay dead.

He rose, holding his rifle, walked forward, slung his rifle when he reached the foot of the slope, and began to climb. If they were minded to joke the odds were with them. They could kill before he could take sight. He set his mouth. If that was in their minds there was one thing they would not have. They would not see that he was feared. He would not seek to unsling his rifle even if they did fire. Only look at them. So they would remember how a Jonner looked upon them even while they killed him. So they would always remember.

He climbed steadily. Not hurrying. Not holding back. So that they would see this. So that they would get that a Jonner did not fear them.

He was nearer now. Enough to hear them.

"He does not hurry," someone stated. The clipped notes suggested that the one who spoke was not pleased by this lack of haste.

"When one cannot calculate what is to come to one," another voice offered, "does one hurry to find out?"

That second speaker was a man of understanding Dillon Dillun Ho thought. Possibly, if there were any argument about disposing of the Jonner this second speaker would argue to let him live. Until, or unless, they found he was dangerous.

It suggested, though, that there *were* some odds that he might continue to live. Which was a comfort.

It was only a little way to the top now, and he straightened somewhat, and lifted his head higher. To consider these Shippers at close quarters. Which was something he had never done before.

His eyes moved over the three who stood near the edge. The squadman he recognised from his clothes. This would be the one who had beefed because the Jonner did not hurry. He had

an angry, impatient look. A man who was satisfied with himself, the Jonner decided. A man who would never admit that he was ever wrong.

The small man, and the thin man next him, they were not fighters. His eyes were level with their feet, and took in two things. Three boxes on the ground, and the nearest box had a mouth pointing out of it. Was that the weapon? Then he saw the rifle the thin man held, and his breath checked for one instant. That was it, and the holder of it would be the one who had killed his clan fellows in the valley. That was something he would remember.

He halted on the edge, and waited.

"Speak," the squadman ordered. He touched his rifle. "Speak true. Or—!"

Dillon Dillun Ho jerked his head back at the valley. "Of that?" he asked. He shrugged. "I spoke in Jonville what was not liked. For that—!" He shrugged again.

"You spoke that your people should not make war?" the small man suggested eagerly.

"Or *your* people," Dillon answered.

The squadman frowned. "We do not make war," he snapped. "It is you Jonners."

Dillon kept his face impassive.

The squadman thrust his face forward. "I spoke you should speak true," he growled. "So speak. That you Jonners prepare another war."

Here were the odds, Dillon thought. Which way should his tongue turn? "I speak only what I can swear," he said slowly. "What is in my peoples' mind. That we must be ready against war from Newtown." He lifted his hands, let them sink. "I spoke that this was a crazy mind. That it could happen that your people had the same mind, fearing us as we feared you." He turned his head to look down to where the tiny bodies lay. "For that, judging that I would poison our peoples' minds, the chiefs sent those." He nodded without emotion. "I shall get whether the chiefs were right in their judgment when I hear you speak."

"When you hear our Council speak," the thin man corrected.

The squadman swung round in anger on Hy Jonsey. "It is not for you to put in on this," he said coldly. "This business, here, in this place, is fighter business, and here *I* speak."

Hy Jonsey's head moved sideways. "Not after his speak," he denied. "I calculate the Council will wish to hear this man." His face was as determined as the squadman's. "Calculating so," he said, "I touch him. He becomes my charge. I touch him for the Council."

The burly squadman was dark. But he did not speak. There was, the Jonner observed, a quality about the thin man which the squadman would not challenge, resent it as plainly as he did. He perceived, further, that the small man also was aware of this, and was amused by it. He thought that that, also, was something he should remember. It might be of use.

The thin man was speaking, and Dillon strained not to miss any note in his voice. "Returning," the thin man said, "there will be no loads to carry. There will be space for all your squad even with one truck less."

"You may take one truck," the squadman conceded. He turned his shoulder. "But—I am not touched to spare you a man to drive the truck."

The thin man was not put out. He turned his head to look at the Jonner. "It can happen that you have driven a truck?" he suggested.

Dillon nodded.

There was nothing in either's face to suggest that it was the Jonner trucks, fifty years before, which had overrun Shiptoun. That the Jonners had gone on from there. Had built stronger and faster trucks. So that it was common knowledge that, were it not for the hills, the trucks of Jonville would before now have burst through any defences Newtown could erect. That every man in Jonville could handle a truck from early in his life, dreaming of a day when he would drive as a conqueror into Newtown.

But it was in their minds.

"Then we will go," the thin man said. He lifted his hand in salute, turned, and Dillon turned with him, not missing the expression on the squadman's face nor the concealed satisfaction of the small man, nor the half-friendly smile this last one gave him. The small one, he thought as he followed along the path, who was so quick to speak of war or not war, was he one who could have use in this mission?

They walked the path in silence, and Dillon was glad of this. Being grateful for one fact. He lived. That was the big gain. It could be, once the Council of the Shippers had heard him,

that he would cease to live. But that was not good odds. It was bigger odds that they would hold him in a cage. If they did that, he must win free. After he had learned what he had come to learn, and take that knowledge back across the hills. But, for now, he lived.

They came down the path to where the trucks stood. The thin man halted. "Can you?" he asked.

Dillon laid down the rifle which the thin man had not demanded he surrender, and went forward. He climbed into the nearest vehicle, and studied the controls. Soon he turned his head to where the thin man stood patiently waiting. "This I can drive," Dillon said.

The thin man stooped for the Jonner rifle, brought it with him, laid it with his in the back of the truck, and climbed in. "Keep to this road," he instructed, and settled himself comfortably. As though it was nothing unusual to be driving with an enemy.

It was not real, Dillon thought, as he set the truck moving. He was a prisoner, yet had not been disarmed. Nor did the man in the back of the truck act as though a guard was needed. Why? Why not? What was there that made these people set all sense on one side? What stopped him if he had a mind to strike the thin man down, take this rifle with its great power, and turn back for the hills? There was nothing to stop him. Except maybe that that was what they might be waiting for him to attempt? Except maybe, that the thin man was not so careless as he might wish the Jonner to believe?

Except, also, that he had not been sent here to escape. Not before he had learned what Jonville needed to learn. But, if the Shippers were more deep than they wanted their enemies to get, they might be too deep for him. That was not a good thing to have to calculate. But, if he was not to fail before he had started, it would be best if he did calculate that way. He drove on uneasily.

But he did not close his eyes as he drove. The truck. There was no new thought about this truck compared to those in Jonville. The fields around them. There was a difference in the fields. His eyes widened. The crops growing in these fields would not be growing across the hills. When the heat came they would grow in Jonville. Which was their proper time. Yet here they grew although it was not the hot time. How was that? Was it because of the towers which stood at the corners of all the fields? What was the work of those

towers, at the tops of which were shields, angled down at the crops below ?

"Are you from the pastures ?" a voice behind him asked.

He answered instinctively. "I drive—" He stopped, feeling the sweat break out on his face. Almost he had admitted to being a fighter driver. But, worse must follow if he did not finish. Only, he must finish differently. "I drive for the food," he said. "To fetch it from our pastures into Jonville. And to take the pastures what they want."

He eased the truck carefully around a bend. If all these Shippers were so sharp his life could finish even more quickly than he had calculated. To note how a man's head turned, to calculate what was in his mind, and put a question in the words that would follow what was in a man's mind, and catch a true answer.

The road straightened, dropping. At the end of the road he saw Newtown. It looked as big as Jonville. His eyes slid, his head careful not to move, and he gauged the land with a professional eye. It was easy ground ; not rough. The new trucks they were building in Jonville would not be halted by this ground even if the Shipper roads were blocked. If Jonville could get its trucks so far as this. That was the hard thing. To bring the trucks over the hills. If that were done, Newtown would never stand.

There was, he remembered, another thought. When they had been coming down the valley, before they had come in sight of the Shipper post, there had been the sound of falling rock. Then, when he climbed, the Jonner post on their hills had been silent. It had not been planned that way. It had been planned that they, too, should play at firing on him as he climbed. But they had not fired.

Was that falling of the rocks another new thought of the Shippers ?

He had, thus, another thing to learn. Which, if word of it did not get back to Jonville, could mean a worse war than ever before.

They were approaching Newtown now, and he slackened speed, turning his head in enquiry.

"They will not look for us to stop," the thin man assured him, and the words added another burden to Dillon's cares. What signal did these Shippers use to pass a word so far without a sign ? For, by the thin man's words, a signal *had* passed.

He could be sure only of one thing. The odds were more big than they had calculated back in Jonville. He felt a kind of crazy laughter inside him. Hard and crazy. It could be that the first Jonner who had got himself into Newtoun was going to be planted in Newtoun. Then, flowing over the laughter, came anger. These Shippers who were so big in their own minds could, maybe, calculate wrongly. They could learn, sometime, if the odds were for him, that they were not so big as they had calculated.

If he could make the odds his way, they *would* learn that !

"The biggest one is the Council House," a voice guided him from the back of the truck.

Smoothly Dillon slid the vehicle to a stop. Then sat. Not looking anywhere. Not at the houses, nor the people, nor at the thin man. As though feared by whatever unknown test lay before him. As a beast might be, suspecting something as yet unseen, obstinately refusing to stir, to be led to that danger.

"Shall I speak that the Council must come out to you?" the thin man asked. There was a distinct note of amusement in his voice. But it was not hostile. Slowly Dillon turned his head. The thin man was smiling. It was, in a way, a reassuring smile, and Dillon remembered that this was the second voice the climber had heard as he breasted the slope, the voice he had argued then was that of a man of understanding.

He smiled back himself, faintly, and climbed out of the truck. The thin man went up the steps to the Council House, carrying both rifles, and Dillon followed.

There was a squadman with fighters at the entrance, and to him the thin man gave the weapons. "These you will want," he said.

The squadman's face did not change. But Dillon saw his hands moving on the new rifle, and he could calculate from this that the rifle was a new thought to the squadman. That, also, in a quiet fashion, the thin man had speaked that this new thought worked. Dillon's rifle they would want to learn if the Jonners had any new thought in it. But the thin man's they would want to make more. Enough for all Newtoun's fighters.

The squadman was eyeing him. Not with enmity. But sharply, taking in every detail. This was a different type of squadman to the one in the hills. An older man, and more dangerous, because he had been tested longer. This was, most jike, Newtoun's Top Squadman, and a hard one to stamp on.

He walked at the thin man's elbow to a pair of doors. Waited as the other knocked, went in behind him. Stood, as the thin man raised his hand in greeting to the three in the chamber. "Hy Jonsey," the thin man announced. "With one from over the hills. Good rising, all."

"Good rising." Three hands rose, and came down together. Three pairs of eyes, pausing courteously on Hy Jonsey, moved on to the alien in their midst. "Good rising," three voices said as one, and their hands rose again in greeting, came down again and were still.

Dubiously the Jonner responded. "Dillon Dillun Ho," he answered.

He went through his rehearsed story, careful to obey the warning impressed on him, not to speak more than he could escape speaking. Finished, and was as silent as they had been while he told his tale.

The centre figure gave the decision. The fugitive claimed sanctuary. That sanctuary he should have. For so long as he did not abuse it. If his heart was found ill to Newtown and its people, he could lay whatever ill came to him from that to his own self. If, after time had gone, it was proved good, Newtown would take him on its roll.

Meanwhile he would live where the Council found good for him to live. Hy Jonsey had touched him for the Council, but it was not found good for him to live where Hy Jonsey lived. Instead, he would live at the house of the Recorder, Mas Halwell, who had taken over the Council's touch at their word. Mas Halwell would give the Council word, as time went, on how he found the heart of Dillon Dillun Ho. Whom the Council wished for good, and looked for good in return.

"I still live," Dillon told himself.

He raised his hand, copying Hy Jonsey, held back to speak his thanks, was well heard, and followed Hy Jonsey from the room.

He heaved a deep breath when the doors closed behind them, not caring that Hy Jonsey at his side saw this relief. Even smiled, shaking his shoulders. "I calculated, it can happen that I was already planted," he said aloud.

Hy Jonsey, looking down at the broad shouldered younger man, chuckled, shaking his head. "Not *so* soon," he answered: "It can happen, if you earn the rolls, that this will not be until you are too old to wish any other journey."

Dillon pursed his lips. "I have still time then," he answered. "I am not at that age yet. Not altogether."

"A year," Hy Jonsey conceded. "Or, even, two."

So that was how long they would take to calculate whether his heart was good or bad. Well, it would not be so long. Jonville could not wait so long as that.

The squadman waited at the door as they came out. Openly his eyes appraised the Jonner. Not with offence, but warily. Equally openly Dillon returned his look. Until the firm lips softened, and the squadman nodded. "It can happen," the veteran said, and he lifted his hand.

It was Hy Jonsey now who drove the truck. Turning off this street, swinging left and right, angling out from the centre of Newtown. On, while the houses drew farther apart from one another, with more land around each. At one he slowed, not stopping. "You will find me in this house," he said, "when-ever you have word for me."

"If I can find it again," Dillon acknowledged.

"It is in sight of where you will live," Hy Jonsey assured him. He pointed ahead. "There. On the bend."

He brought the truck to a halt a few minutes later at the gate of the house he had indicated. Dillon climbed out behind him, followed him through the gate. The door of the house opened. A portly man, soft coloured, with a seamed face, smiled at them as they halted, lifted a plump hand. "Good rising. Mas Halwell," he greeted them.

Dillon responding to the salutation, conscious of his soiled state, and lack of means in a strange land, mustered what dignity he could. Held it for not longer than he could hold his breath. Not longer. For behind his host to be, raising her small hand in greeting to him, was a girl, shapely, flower-like, blinking a slow, warm smile.

"Arna, my daughter," Mas Halwell said.

Chapter Three

A truck stopped at the gate of the medicine woman's house, and Jone Heng rose from her measuring, and went through to the entrance.

"Good rising," she said cheerfully, then stopped. This was not another patient. "If you will come in," she said to Hy Jonsey, and stood back to permit him to enter.

In her own room she listened without interruption to his story. "I can hear this?" she asked at the end.

He nodded. "All Newtown can hear what I have speaked to you," he said. "But not what comes now." He shook his head. "And certainly it is not for the ears of Dillon Dillun Ho. Among other things." He nodded to Jone Heng. "He plays it well," he told her. "Jonville sent one who is sharp." He grinned, laying a finger on the top button of his shirt. "He did not bring a sack with him. So—Newtown gifts him with one." He looked at her expectantly, still smiling.

She did not fail him. "The shirts in Newtown's sack will all have a long-speak button. So that, whatever he speaks—!"

The man nodded. "It is just. He has been speaked that whether good or bad comes to him in Newtown will come from his own self. His own speak will prove him."

He rose from his seat to stand before the window. "Here is what the Council has in mind. The long speaker on his shirt is one of its own. For this, the Council must have listeners, whether by light or dark. Those it can trust to speak only to the Council of what they hear. Or among themselves in time of need."

"Me?"

Hy Jonsey nodded. "And myself. And certain others. Taking turns. To free you for this, it is needed for you to send those who come for healing to the Council House."

She accepted this, looked beyond it. "If the Council calculate such a need," she reasoned, "it must calculate there are bigger odds for war."

"The Council calculates this," he agreed.

"Does Hy Jonsey also?"

His face was sombre. "Ask yourself," he replied. "If you were a Jonner chief. And wanted war. What better way of learning the odds than to send a man among us. To hear. To learn. To return." He moved his shoulders irritably. "What better way than play such a one is in danger from his own people?"

"That is how he came?"

Hy Jonsey's eyes were dark. "With fighters after him. Using their rifles. But—not hitting him." He shrugged. "It could happen that they would have hurt him."

"Our fighters drove them back?"

The thin man shook his head. "My rifle," he answered. He turned looking out through the window. "It was not more than target work. Beyond their range to strike back."

She said nothing for a space. Until he turned back. Then, "Now you feel what you feel," she said, "would you shoot now, getting how you would feel?"

"Because of the war they want," he said steadily, "I would do this again." His eyes were still shadowed, but his mouth was not so tight. He came away from the window, moving thoughtfully. "That was my need," he acknowledged. "To be able to think clear. Not only on that I had killed those who had no thought of me; no guard against me. But of why I killed." He looked at her with gratitude. "Always," he told her, "you have the right word for me."

He stood looking down at her. "It was in my mind, when we went up to the hills, that when I came back I would ask if you had the right word for me in another work." He paused. "I calculate now, that if your word is not the one I hope to hear, it will be the right one still."

She did not misunderstand what lay behind his words. She flushed. Involuntarily she drew her legs up under her. But, beyond that, she did not move, and her eyes, which had flashed away to another corner of the room, came back bravely to his. "I will hear," she said.

"That I have you in mind. When I am calculating on other things. Or—better still—not calculating. Awake—I dream. You are in my dreams. You are my dream." He came nearer. His voice deepened. He spoke the old words, not smoothly, yet not forcing them. His voice gave a meaning to them that was an intimate thing, forging a bond between them if she would accept it. "Have you a skirt, Jone Heng?" he asked.

"I have a skirt," she replied. She was in communion with him her voice promised. Her eyes, her face, the whole of her told him this, and the light surged in his face in answer.

"Will you wear your skirt for me?"

"Yes."

He came down to her as she came up to him, and there was no more either needed to say.

Until after, when they sat together contentedly, in an excitement of peace.

"How does this bear on the Council work?" Jone questioned.

He considered this. Not answering lightly; and the woman, who had not desired a light answer, waited with her own thoughts.

"Because the Council has touched us to do this," he said eventually, "we must make it a first thing. Before us."

"That was how I calculated also," Jone agreed. She smiled. "It will make it that we are in our company more," she pointed out.

"That was a thing which was also in my mind," Hy Jonsey retorted happily.

Later still she touched on another matter. "Your new thought for the rising?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I have a rifle growing from it." He leaned forward, his hands locked together. "Nevertheless, it is in me that this is what will give us the rising. That the power which is in the rifle is not more than one part of this thought."

"As the lights for the fields were a part?"

He grunted. "For the fields, the light is soft, and spreads. Yet is so strong to draw up the crops through the earth. Even now, when the wind is cold, and the earth hard. It was in my mind that if I should take this, not spread, but close—" His hands moved, illustrating his conception, and she murmured her understanding. "This I have done. Yet not rightly. What in the fields warms and draws, in the rifle strikes and burns. But does not have the power to lift."

"Does Hy Jonsey accept this?" she asked. "Will he now speak that his dream will not work?"

"No," he denied. "But—will the Jonners give us time we must have to find? Or do they war before we have the rising?" He licked his lips. "Because the Council calculates the same they have heard a word that Plum Halsey speaked."

Her eyebrows rose. "Now what can the trader speak that will help in this?" she questioned.

Hy Jonsey shook his head at her. "When I heard what was in his mind," he told her, "I unsayed some of what was in my mind on him. He asks to go over the hills to the Jonners."

She sat up in sudden surprise. "Now, if that is not crazy—!"

Her lover chuckled. "By Plum Halsey's speak, the Jonners will hear him. Out of their need for what he offers. Against what we need."

She set her chin on her fist. "The things they will want are not those which we should give. If it makes them strong for war."

His eyes twinkled. "The Council *did* calculate on that," he assured her. He caught her fist in his large hand, held it

a helpless prisoner, until she laughed and sued for peace. Then, more seriously once more. "It is time that is our need. If Plum Halsey serves us in this, we get more than we make bigger the odds against us. Also, it can happen that the word Plum Halsey brings of their living can also help."

"That is the biggest of all," she said, surprising him. "There is only one thing we get on the Jonners. That they do not calculate as we do. So that, if we learned how they calculate, we would get how it was best to speak them."

He grunted. "If you hear Andas Godal we have always speaked them wrong. Keeping our rifles between them and us. Not hearing them even when they did not make war."

"And your speak?" she enquired.

He shrugged. "If I get what is in their minds, they remember one thing only. That, from the first landing, they were outside Shiptoun's fence. And, after Shiptoun, ours. That it is we, and those before us, who would not give them what is theirs as much as ours. That each Jonner believes this of us. That it is our wish to keep them as the beasts. Since if they were so strong as we are they would do better than we have done. They calculate, because we fear that we will not hear them when they speak soft. Because we will not hear them, however they speak, they should make themselves so strong that when the war comes they will stamp us flat."

"So?" Jone demanded.

He turned to look at her. "Inside, I hear Andas Godal. But, until I can calculate that the Jonners will also hear him, I take the line of the Council. That it can happen that the Jonners want war however we speak. For that, I used the rifle that grew from my thought. Not speaking that since the rifle was not what I looked for I should make that it had not been found."

His voice was harsh. "It is not inside me that the rifle is a good thing. But, it is a thing. The Council, all Newtoun, has touched me to find new thought. Because of that, it is not for me to speak which new thought I shall own to finding. I must speak all my finding. To speak for one, and not speak for another goes one way only. That I would not find any more new thought of any kind. If I were like that, I would not be what I was born to be."

He stood up. "It is not for me to speak what is good or not good. Only to speak of what I dream." He looked down at

her, his mouth quirked. "If I dream what is not good, that is for me to answer. How—? I do not get. Or when." He shrugged. "It is in me that hope I will have to answer more for my good dreams than the not good ones."

She was silent. Until he came back to her, his voice light. "It can happen that I am answering now," he said. "That you are an answer for my good dreams." He took her face in both hands, gently, smiling at her. "Some of my dreams must truly have been very good," he said.

It was a long time before they moved from their place. In obedience to the demands that their new task had made. The need for each of the listeners to rest, so that none would begin his spell tired. Not alert to catch every word the Jonner inside Newtown might speak. Who might be a spy. Who, almost certainly, had been sent as a spy.

"At first light," Hy Jonsey repeated as he left, "me. From the middle to the beginning of the dark, you. In the dark, the others." He took a small parcel from his shirt, opened it, and hung the instrument around her neck. "You will take note of all he speaks. At the end of your time, one will come from the Council to take your work to the Council."

"If I do not get the one to whom he speaks—?"

"That is not your worry. There are eyes as well as ears. Their work and ours runs the same. The Council can put their work with ours, and make it one thing."

"It is well planned," Jone said.

He nodded. "One thing more," he said. "If you calculate that what you hear the Council should learn fast, there is a place in the side to touch." He turned the instrument to show the inset. "But not except what you calculate is a first thing."

He stooped towards her. "When the dark comes again, I will also. If Jone Heng does not send a word that her skirt is not for Hy Jonsey as he was so crazy to calculate."

"If I send such word," she whispered, "you will be well not to come. For that will be that I *am* gone crazy."

He chuckled. "It would be the other way," he teased. "That you had been, but were not any more."

"Then I will stay crazy," she promised. "If that will bring you back."

"It will bring me," Hy Jonsey swore. "It would bring me back from the rising itself."

Dillon Dillun Ho scowled. He could afford to do so in the privacy of the room he had been given. There were no spy-holes. He could be sure of that. He had made sure of that in the first three days. That had been his first precaution. Whatever other observation he lay under, and it was not concealed that he was under observation, in here he could relax. His mouth twisted sardonically. Except that that was the one thing he could not do. Because of all that was on his mind.

He sat down on the edge of his couch, his hands hanging between his knees.

How far had he got? He had not got very far. Not in what he had been sent to do. He might have done better had they put him in a cage. If they had calculated, openly, that since he was a Jonner he must be an enemy. That way, thinking him helpless, they might have speaked. Where they were silent now because he was free.

Except that he was not free. His chain was time. They did not give him time. In the light there was Mas Halwell, fat, flabby, friendly, Mas Halwell, with his questions. It had been like that from the first moment.

"From the first landing to the end of Shiptoun was eighty years," Mas Halwell had explained. "From end of Shiptoun to now is fifty years. When Shiptoun ended, much of the story of our people, yours and ours, was lost also."

"We have our story," Dillon denied.

The plump man beamed. "Now that is good," he praised. "Someday, when there is no more war between our people, your story can be read with ours. But," he raised a finger in warning, "only if we have care that our story is not lost." He nodded heavily. "That is my work," he said.

"To write the story."

"To keep it. To search mens' minds, upturning what they did not calculate they remembered. So that, when we go back to Earth and Mars and Venus, we may speak of all that was done, and by whom. Not as savages not knowing their descending."

Was that all that Mas Halwell was? A keeper of a record? Seeking only to know more of Newtoun's past. Checking it against this new source, the version of Newtoun's enemy. Never satisfied. Never ceasing his questions.

Or had Mas Halwell been set to this work by a cunning Council? Asking, among all the questions he asked con-

tinually, those questions which would tell Newtown what it wanted to know of how strong the enemy truly was ?

He could not relax one blink. In the play that he was a Jonner, who, for his life, must turn Shipper. He must not seem as holding back what he had no cause now for holding back. So he must answer every question that Mas Halwell asked. Must remember, too, how he had answered before. Since this soft, friendly, terrible, fat man asked the certain questions a hundred times, each time in a changed fashion. But, the same questions however fashioned.

Only at evening times, when Mas Halwell had no time for speaking, and when the dark came, and she would not let her father continue, was there rest from the questions of Mas Halwell. That was when the girl asked her questions. Woman's questions, surely, but in them, also, were seeds which could grow in Mas Halwell's mind as he sat, breathing happily, and heard the speak of the girl with Dillon.

Also, *he* must ask. Was he not playing a Jonner who sought to grow into a Shipper ? Then there were things a true man, such as he played to be, would look to get. Some of these he asked Mas Halwell, because he feared it would not be held good in Newtown to ask these things of a woman.

He could get something of how things were from the stories of the two people. How, with the Shippers, who were more in numbers than the Jonners from the beginning, the old ways of Earth had never changed. As, across the hills, where there were few men and more few women, the ways had had to be changed. If they were to grow into a people.

So that, in Jonville, no man might have a woman for himself alone which was how he was both Dillon and Dillun, since either man could have been his father by his mother Ho.

Perhaps, in another fifty years, a man would be able to have only one name. Perhaps, if the war was good, and there were no Shipper men left alive, but only Shipper women, it would not take fifty years.

If that came good, he would speak that for the play he had made, he would take the girl Arna for his woman. He would not ask more honour if Jonville gave him that. For himself only.

He licked his lips. Never had he seen such a woman. She reminded him of things he had not calculated for how long he could not say. The sky colours, and the tree colours. Of the

long, hot running against one's fellows, and the river at the end one flung oneself into. The cold water, cold so that one yelled when it came up around one's middle. Of the smell of the fires in the hills. Of waiting with one's knife for the lana one must kill with the knife only, alone, thinking of the speed and the strength of the lana. But which one could not become a man unless one killed. Of one's mother Ho. So that, dreaming of the girl one was hot and cold and hot and cold and hot. Hot. With her great, soft eyes, and the shape her clothes moved.

He would ask for her for his woman.

If he killed his lana. Newtoun's secret was his lana, and his eyes and ears were his knife. So that, if he got Newtoun's secret, and took it back, he would have killed Newtoun.

If he got Newtoun's secret. But, how much had he got? Only one. Perhaps two. Perhaps, but only perhaps, three. There was the rifle of Hy Jonsey. Which, when he went, must go with him. That was his one. What was not so sure was the boxes of the small man Andas Godal, with the trumpet in the end. The end nearest to the Jonner post which had been silent when he climbed. Which should not have been still. Which could have been still only because the men in that post were dead. What new thought was in the boxes to kill them?

The last thing he had got he could not swear. Yet it must be. That, in some way, the Shippers could hear word where there was nothing seen. It must be so. After what had happened in the hour before the dark yesterday.

He had been leaving the house of Mas Halwell, to go to speak with Hy Jonsey. When the girl Arna had spokeed him that he should ask the thin man if his hand was better where he had burned it. He had come to Hy Jonsey's house, walking slowly, at the same time as the medicine woman had arrived there also.

She had greeted him, and he had answered after the fashion of the Shippers, and they had gone to the door together. Hy Jonsey, his hand wrapped, had opened the door to them, and the first thing the medicine woman had done was to attend to the hand of Hy Jonsey. It had been when she had finished putting on a new wrapping that she had looked over at Dillon, and had smiled.

"You may speak Arna Halwell that Hy Jonsey's hand is almost well," she had told him.

He had not let them get the shock to him of what she had done. Let them calculate that he had not got what she had uncovered. That way, he might learn how this had been done. To take this new thought back to Jonville.

He shifted, remembering another thing. If it lay with Squadman Don Sonjo who had wanted to kill him the first day because he was a Jonner, and who wanted to kill him more now because Arna Halwell spokeed him sweet, then he would take nothing back. He would take nothing to any place.

He wondered if he should speak Mas Halwell, asking him the law of Newtoun. If there was one who wanted bad for one, could one kill that one?

He made his mind become cold again. The first thing was Newtoun's secret. Not the squadman. The hard thing against him was time. If Jonville was to make a good war they must make it soon. Before Newtoun was more strong. Already he got that Newtoun was strong. But, if he could learn Newtoun's secret, and Jonville struck fast, Newtoun could fall.

What he must do, then, was to slip this chain of time.

In the light he was always under the eye of one or another of them. In the dark there would be watchers. He nodded to himself. He would take those odds. There were certain points only where a watcher could stand. He could pass those points.

But, after that—what? After he was free of the ring around Mas Halwell's house, where should he seek? He shrugged. He did not have any choice on that. He could search only where he had knowledge that something was hid. In the houses of Hy Jonsey and of Andas Godal. The hard thing was that he could search once only, and in that once he must find what he sought. Search, find, then—hardest of all—be lost. Be lost for all the time it took to reach the hills, pass the Shipper posts, and reach the hills that Jonville held. It was odds that he would not get so far.

He was one man in a play which wanted more than one man.

Chapter Four

He stood up slowly, in the knowledge that he must attempt what he had no hope of accomplishing. That, when he failed, he must pay for it with his life. That Jonville would gain nothing from his failure. That it was Newtoun which would gain, being warned. Nevertheless, this was what he had been sent to do, and he must do it.

He would do it this same dark, so soon as he was sure that the house slept.

He listened. He knew the noises which told him that Mas Halwell was safe on his couch, that Arna slept. He had taken pains to learn these noises. He listened.

He heard instead, forcing its way past his disbelief, another noise. He heard a night-bird call.

"The gora," he muttered. He fought down a mad desire to roar with laughter. "The gora calls," he whispered. "My own clan."

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. How they had found him was a thing he could not guess. But found him they had, and had speaked beyond doubt that he was not now one man alone. Now it was different odds, and Newtown was no longer safe. Once he had speaked how much he had learned.

His head turned. There was another noise. There was someone below who struck upon the door. He found himself rigid, crouching, expectant. Who was this who came in the dark, late, and demanded that the house should rise, and open to him? Who else but someone in authority would act so big? and for what other business than that concerning the Jonner in the house?

He heard Mas Halwell going down, and he wondered. How should he play? Then, slowly, but not trying to conceal the noise, he opened his own door, and stood, waiting in the light from below. Until Mas Halwell called his name.

He went down. To meet the ugly eyes of Squadman Don Sonjo, and the steady, cool eyes of Top Squadman Son Sonjon.

"Will you give us your room?" the older fighter asked Mas Halwell, and at once the door was opened for him. Squadman Don Sonjo went in first, then Dillon Dillun Ho, and the older man followed, and closed the door.

"Was it this dark you calculated to hear from your clan?" Turning, the Top Squadman's question came with smooth danger.

But he got nothing from Dillon. Nearly he did, almost the spy speaked what he could not have explained away. But, playing the man a true man would have been, he growled, as though he would have liked to have done more than growl, that he had not calculated to hear from his clan. Not, he added, unless Jonville crossed the hills. And he speaked this as though being a true man, and mindful that his life was still his,

yet he did not like the minds of Newtown towards him. Nor their ways. Particularly the mind of Squadman Don Sonjo, beside him, breathing disbelief.

Still playing such a man, he took a step towards Top Squadman Son Sonjon. "What is your law here?" he snarled. "What charge must I pay to stamp on someone's grave?"

"That is not good speak," Son Sonjon warned. His eyes forbade his companion to take up the challenge.

"What charge must I pay," the Jonner persisted.

"No!" Son Sonjon was stern. "Newtown will not hear you on this. For your life." He brought the interview back to the reason for their presence. "You will speak true on this. When you got that the gora that called was no bird, but one of your own clan, what was in your mind to do?"

Now all Dillon's control could not hide the shock of this. That they got, not just that it was one of his people, but one of his clan that had called like a bird? How could they have got this? He was silent as his mind beat out the dust of recollection. He had it now. He, himself, to himself, in his room, had spoken that it was the clan. And had been heard. Not in the room, but in whatever place it was the squadman had listened. Where was the long speaker hid which had trapped and carried his words?

He must answer. He did answer. Finding such an answer as the true man he played could have given. That he feared his clan, getting where he lodged, had come to kill him.

It did not matter that Squadman Don Sonjo would calculate he lied. He would calculate that any odds. It was the older man who would speak what the Council would do.

They would do nothing. Not for this dark. When the light came, so Top Squadman Son Sonjon promised him, he would hear what Newtown's mind was. He climbed the stair with the eyes of the two squadmen on his back. And closed the door of his room.

"What do they do?" the girl whispered.

He stared at her, almost in panic, not understanding why she should be here. Why had she slipped in while he was below, hiding behind the open door until he returned?

What should he say to her? That would be heard, he thought with a surge of anger, by the Council's dirty-eared listeners. Who would be up on their haunches now, quivering, eager not to miss anything of the business between a Shipper woman and a Jonner man.

What would they do to her for this ? Or—was this another testing by the Council ?

“ Nothing,” he answered slowly. “ Until the light.” He felt anger rising in him again. “ What is in this for you ?” he demanded.

He was close to her. His hands took her, his fingers biting into her arms. But, she was pressing hard against him.

“ This,” she muttered. “ This ! This !”

Then it was over, and they were staring at each other, searching, asking. Without words. Until her tongue slid out, the tip moving across her lips, and the slow softness came back into her eyes, and she smiled, and nodded to the smile broadening across his mouth.

Smiled, and stood up, and went to the door. Looked back, still smiling, and was gone. Dillon, licking his own lips, gazing at the shut door, got that this dark, *this* dark, was more than any time that had gone before. Now it was not Jonville or Newtown for him. It was her. Now she was his first thing. Now he must make all his odds work for that.

He lay awake, going over in his mind all that had come to him, calculating how he must play when the light came.

He was awake first of the house, padding silently across the floor to stand by the window ; examining with hard eyes all the contents of the bag the Council had given him in exchange for the clothes in which he had come. Until eventually, satisfied, he dressed, and then sat down to wait until movement told the others had awakened.

It was for eating, though, that he was called. Surprising him. For he had expected that the Council would have acted swiftly. But, although he waited, the squadman did not come. Why not, he wondered ? What play was this ? For what reason did the Council hold back ? He felt himself growing more tense with every hour, and wondered if this was what was in their mind. To keep him hanging. So that, when they came, he would be more like to slip.

It was after the middle meal that he got the answer. When Mas Halwell, puffing in his chair, spoke that he did no more this day. “ The sleep I lost last night,” the fat man rumbled, “ I will take back now.” He blinked at Dillon innocently, too innocently. “ It is in my mind that I have kept you too much inside these walls. So, before you sicken, while I sleep, go out and walk in the light.”

Did they calculate that he was a fool? Almost Dillon spat with anger and shame. A second Jonner had come seeking a first, and would have left his sign. For the first to find, so that they could meet. With Newtown's fighters creeping to ring them round.

But, how else was he to meet his fellow? He must do as the Council was deliberately making smooth for him. Then it would be for a Jonner fighter to prove that, in the dark, the men of Newtown were no match for him.

"It would be good to walk in the light while other idle ones sleep," Arna said with meaning.

"Very good," her father agreed. "It will be a good thing for you to calculate how Dillon will get this good. While you are busy changing the clothes of the couches, and steeping the soiled ones."

So they would not risk that hurt might come to the Newtown woman. He nodded as he smiled back at Mas Halwell. Let it be that way. He would still make the odds come for him.

He walked as had been laid down. Playing the man who wanted only to show good in the calculations of the Council. Finding the mark his clan fellow had set for him to find. Finding it as he walked, not showing he had found it, not slowing, not needing to slow. Getting what it speaked. Walking for the good of walking. Round, and, at last, back to the house of Mas Halwell. To meet Top Squadman Son Sonjon at the gate.

"What is this new thought in Jonville that burns across the sky?" the squadman greeted him. There was a harsher, more urgent note in his voice.

But Dillon, staring at him blankly, could honestly shake his head. "No," he answered. "This I do not get."

There was silence between them, heavy and hard. They were down to the bone, Dillon recognised. But, not on any matter where he could change the odds. He did not get what this new thought was. He could calculate that those who had sent him had made sure that he did not get it. Since Newtown might well have ways to make a man speak. But, if he had never learned, there was nothing he could speak.

"It can happen that you would not have been shown this." The squadman's mind had worked as Dillon's had done. "It can also happen that you have speaked true from the beginning." His words fell slow in the heat, each making a mark, like drops of water would make on the dry, dusty ground. "It

can happen. We shall learn." He nodded. "You can take the odds on that," he warned.

He walked past Dillon, climbed into the waiting truck, and the dust blown by its going hid Dillon where he stood, veiling him.

Then, as the dust drifted down, he moved, going to the house. This dark, he told himself, this is when it must be. Past those who watched. Who would be watching more sharply now that Jonville had shown a new thought. For their lives, for Newtoun's life, they would watch very sharply.

In the house he felt the atmosphere tense. Mas Halwell, if he had slept, had not been wakened with a good word. Not from Top Squadman Son Sonjon. He had gone deeper down into the flesh that clothed him, so that his eyes shone the more brightly, being the only things about him that seemed to move. Dillon was aware of a sudden kindliness towards the older man, who had aged so fast. But for the daughter he was not sorry. She, also, had changed. But not like Mas Halwell. She had grown more alive. And more dangerous.

He felt response run quivering through him when her eyes swept towards him, and stayed on him. Not resting. Blinking faster, speaking plain. Speaking that if there was a matter between Jonville and Newtoun, there was also a matter between a man and a woman. That he must take the odds of that also.

Mas Halwell's attention was not for them. And Dillon looked back at her, and let his eyes speak. Watched her tongue slide out of hiding, back and forth across her full lips. Felt the quivering run through him more strongly, so that his hands that lay on the table moved by themselves.

The gora would not call again this dark. But his clan fellow would be waiting. As he waited. Until after the sounds ceased in the house. He stood up then, and made ready.

His feet made no sound. He passed through the window that was a black space in the blackness which was the dark on Sumedin with no moon to lighten the darkness. His mind told his feet where they must tread, and he went that way, without noise, drifting. Knowing that Newtoun's watchers could not match him in the dark. He passed, undetected, between the watchers, and faded off. To where the one who waited for him lay. To the exact place. There he stopped.

"Dillon Dillun Ho," he breathed.

A hand touched him, ran over him. "Is it so hot you must go naked?" The question held a note of humour.

"This way," Dillon answered, "Newtown does not hear the words my mouth speaks."

The man beside him stiffened. "Speak that plain," he ordered.

Piece by piece, Dillon Dillun Ho reported all that he had learned. Was sucked clean. Concerning Hy Jonsey's rifle, and where the lenser's house was to be found. Concerning Andas Godal's boxes, and what he calculated might have happened.

"It was that way," the voice told him. He could recognise the voice now; could put a name to it. It was a name which commanded respect in Jonville. "The rocks stamped them flat. So that is another new thought. But, not one which will save them."

He had speaked all he knew Dillon told himself. He had given his people the key which could open the barriers one hundred and thirty years old. Those barriers which had held Jonville off from their lawful inheritance. This one stood high among the leaders. This one's approval would surely stand him well.

"There is the daughter—" he opened.

He was heard, again without interruption. Then—blasted with a venom made worse by its quietness. Finally, "If she is all of you speak," the voice told him, "it is not you who will have her for yourself. Who has done no more than eat, and listen, and play that you are the crazy thing you would have to be to run to the Shippers because of what Jonville would do to such a crazy thing that speaked in such a fashion."

It was instinct that saved Dillon. Or an ear sharpened by the past days to catch a change in tone. A change which told of a new line of thought. The chief's knife slid along his ribs as he went sideways. His own right hand, thinking it seemed for itself, moved forward. There was a sound, bitten back, throttled, and Dillon jerked his knife free, and leaped back.

He knew where his blade had gone. He flowed away from the meeting place. He would not be followed. No man, not even a Jonner chief, would move more than one step with the wound he had taken. But, if there were others with him, to whom he could speak before he died, this would not be the end of the matter.

Viciously, moving back to Mas Halwell's house, he cursed the man he had stabbed. For the swift way that man had calculated that with Dillon dead, it would speak that Jonville had avenged itself on one who sought to betray his own people. Now, that one who had calculated so shrewdly was himself dead, and it would be clear, when he was found, that only one man could have stamped on him.

A new thought came to him, and he clutched at it. It was not a sure thing, but it was the best he could calculate.

He passed again through the watchers, through the window. Inside, however, he did not make for his own room.

Arna, lying awake, became aware that she was no longer alone.

"You?"

"I." Dillon's hands touched her. "I waited until I was sure your father slept."

"You had no need to wait so long," she rebuked him. But pleasantly.

At first light, waking on his own couch, he watched his room door open. Saw Arna come in. Saw her face.

"The coverings I changed yesterday on the couch," she said. "I must change again on mine. That are earth marked."

Stooping, before he got what was in her mind, she drew aside the quilt across his feet, turned his foot to see his sole. Straightened, looking at him with troubled eyes. "You did not wait for what you speaked you had waited," she accused. "Before you came to me you walked in the dark."

He could not be sure what was in her. "Am I the fool Squadman Don Sonjo speaked I must be to calculate that there can be a good heart in a Jonner?" she asked. "Or have you another word?"

She waited, quietly relentless, as he lay wondering what she must do when she learned what they would find by the bridge over the river. When they came to this house to hear his speak on what they had found.

He heard them coming now. He recognised Top Squadman Son Sonjon's voice as it came to them through the window. Heard the sound of feet coming to the door of the house.

Chapter Five

Top Squadman Son Sonjon climbed heavily into his truck, and nodded to the driver. He had more on his mind than he found for comfort. This was a thing which only the Council could speak.

His mind went over the events of the past hours. From when the dark began, and the watchers around the house had moved up to their places. Under the complacent self-assurance of Squadman Don Sonjo. Who was not so complacent now. Indeed, who had lost all his self-assurance, and had tried to get it back with anger and with threats. Top Squadman Son Sonjon frowned. That was another thing he must bring to the Council. That Squadman Don Sonjo was no help.

Had not been any help from the beginning. When the word had come from the hearers that the door of the Jonner's room had opened, and had closed. Giving the watchers warning that the game was moving.

Top Squadman Son Sonjon wondered if he had not expected that the watchers would fail. Because of the gaps which they must leave to tempt one seeking to pass. But which they could now calculate had been too wide. So that this Jonner fighter, who's tread was soft as smoke, and with as little sound, had gone by them as the night wind. Returning in the same fashion. Not that they could know that he had returned until, towards the coming of the light, the listeners spoke that the door of his room had once more opened and closed again.

It could not be other than that Dillon Dillun Ho had done this. For who else was there who would use a knife on a Jonner hidden in the dark and not come crying to the fighters? No man of Newtoun would do so.

He had gone to the house to hear what speak Dillon Dillun Ho would offer. And had come away empty. No. Not empty. But not with what he had expected.

The girl had opened the door to him and to Squadman Don Sonjo, her arms full of clothes from the couches. Their eyes had gone past her to the Jonner behind her, and the two fighters had stiffened at what they saw. At the top button of the shirt the Jonner wore, swathed around with cloth.

Top Squadman Son Sonjon's grim mouth twisted wryly. It was a piece of deliberate impudence. It was also something which appealed to him. That signified that Dillon Dillun Ho, Jonner and barbarian and, maybe, spy, could calculate the

work this Newtoun button did, and was minded to show, plainly, that he did not like it. At his further insolence, also, when he got that the fighters had seen, and put up mocking fingers to unwind the muffling strip of cloth. "In the light," the Jonner said, "let your ears hear what I speak. But, in the dark—!" He shook his head.

"Why not in the dark?" Son Sonjon asked patiently.

It was the girl who answered. "You should ask that of me," she said brazenly.

It was then, the Top Squadman reflected, that Squadman Don Sonjo struck the odds out of their fingers. Snarling, and lurching forward. To be brought up sharply, his belly against the point of the knife which had appeared in the Jonner's hand. "Now?" Dillon Dillun Ho had asked.

What would have happened, Son Sonjon wondered, if the Jonner had not obeyed him? If he had not put his knife back? If Squadman Don Sonjo had then raised his rifle? He frowned. There could have been only one end to that. He would have had to kill. He would have had to shoot Squadman Don Sonjo down. Since Newtoun could spare one squadman better than it could spare this Jonner, who might still have a word for them they would not wish to lose. But it had not come to that. Though it nearly did come when the girl had added for them all to hear what she calculated about Squadman Don Sonjo.

That was not all she spoke. But, Top Squadman Son Sonjon grunted, that was all she spoke that was true. For she had sworn that the Jonner had been with her all the dark. Before them all, before Mas Halwell himself, she had spoke this. She would not unsay one jot of this. It was the whole dark.

There had been nothing to be gained more. He had left Squadman Don Sonjo to command those who sought to track the way the Jonner had come. If they could. He had not calculated they would find luck with that work. Only a Jonner could have done that, and they could not use the Jonner whom they had. Not calculating that he would speak true of what his eyes showed him.

The truck slowed down before the Council House, stopped, and the Top Squadman descended. Inside, he was not kept waiting. His report made, he was invited to speak his mind.

"It can happen," he said, "that our Jonner is not on the line which Jonville sent him to be on." He held up his hand in

warning. "I do not speak that, hoping this, we should let him run. But the one he killed, who's face I have seen, is one whom the Jonners will not have wished to lose. Who is well known to Newtown. Who was Gild Balk Lan." He nodded at their surprised faces. "That one himself," he said. "Whom I was glad to see dead." He pursed his lips. "Our Jonner will pay for that killing if Jonville gets it was he who used a knife on his chief."

The Council was still, weighing up what this would mean. "This one was sent. Then Gild Balk Lan came to take back what this one had learned. To be killed by this one. Why?" One of the three leaned forward. "What of this? That our Jonner must be killed, once he had speaked what he had learned, *before* he could speak what Jonville did not want Newtown to learn. On their new thought that burns in the sky."

They considered this idea.

"If it is this way," the Top Squadman said, "that he killed first, before *he* was killed, then he will get that he is safe only on Newtown's line. But, this does not help if he does not have knowledge of Jonville's new thought."

"That we will learn," the Council agreed. "In time."

"If we have time," Son Sonjon warned.

"It can happen," they answered, "that we shall not need much time. The lenser, Hy Jonsey, asks that the touch be lifted from him. Because of a new thought he has for the rising."

The Top Squadman came upright. "If Hy Jonsey speaks *so* big—I!" he breathed.

"That is why," the middle one of the Council said, "you will be more busy. So that our Jonner, if he is a friend, is not hurt. Or, if he is not a friend, does not hurt Newtown."

"I will take that touch," Top Squadman Son Sonjon promised.

There was more now for him to calculate he thought as he climbed back into his truck. For all that he had speaked to the Council he could not let Dillon Dillun Ho run free. More so, now that Hy Jonsey had come close to Newtown's heart's breath.

He felt for the stud on the *second* button of his shirt. "Squadman Don Sonjo," he said.

"I hear you."

"What word?"

"None. The signs are not strong to track." The speaker's voice was angry.

Top Squadman Son Sonjon nodded. There was no more to it. Bad Squadman that Don Sonjo was he was still the best tracker Newtown had. If he failed—! He shrugged. Then ordered the fighters to return. Leaving only the guard around the house.

He settled back in his seat. "The house of Hy Jonsey the lenser," he instructed.

However badly the day had opened, at the house of the lenser there was good cheer. For the thin man's eyes were bright when he invited his visitor to enter.

"You have found?" Son Sonjon wasted no words.

"Not *found*," Hy Jonsey corrected. "But—I calculate I shall find." He looked across the room to where Jone Heng sat quietly. "For which we shall thank Jone Jonsey," he said.

The caller's eyebrows rose. "So!" he commented. He frowned at them. "The name is changed, it seems, and without word." He set his hands on his hips. "Is the Jonsey house so well stocked that there is no space for gifts?" he demanded.

The two chuckled. "Before the Council lifted its touch," the lenser explained, "the hearing of the Jonner was a first thing. So that we could not give word of us. But now—"

Top Squadman Son Sonjon grunted. "It can happen," he insinuated, "that Jone Heng and Hy Jonsey would be glad if *they* were a first thing. Which they could be if the Council lifted the touch on them. Which is why Hy Jonsey finds a new thought. Maybe Hy Jonsey's new thought is one not so new—!"

The thin man took his arm, nodding to the woman, who rose, laughing. "We shall make him unsay this," Hy Jonsey promised.

They led him, a willing captive, through the house. To the lenser's workroom behind.

"Now speak that this is not a new thought," they challenged.

The floor was clear except for a set of steam track rails running down the length, pinned down to the floor all the way. At the far end, upon the rails, and close to the wall, was set a block of wood. The wood, the squadman noted, was as thick as his body. He went close to it, peered over it. Behind it were springs, set in another wall built up inside the wall of the room.

He scratched his chin. "This new thought?" he asked. "Is it a new steam track? To finish in your house?"

Hy Jonsey's hand turned him about, and he walked obediently to the far side of the room. To where a trolley stood upon the track, a trolley laden with a block of metal.

"From the forges," Hy Jonsey said. "For weight."

Son Sonjon bent, setting his shoulder against the trolley, and put out his strength. The trolley did not move, and he straightened. "It would take a full squad to move this," he commented.

The lenser smiled. He touched three places on the block where three devices stood proud of the face. "With these it moves," he answered.

"I will see this," the squadman told him.

He turned at the woman's touch, considered the lenses she held out to him. "I must wear these?" he asked.

"If you wish to see afterwards," Jone warned.

She brought a second pair from a pocket, drew the strap down over her head until the lenses masked her eyes. He saw Hy Jonsey had donned a similar pair, and he took the ones she proffered, and drew them down.

He moved, as commanded, to one side. Saw Hy Jonsey's hands upon the block. A thin note touched his ears, then three lines of light lanced back from the block, widened as he saw them spring into being, and the trolley surged along the track, and slammed against the tree girth before the springs. The lights ceased.

"The light is set to stop," Hy Jonsey's voice came faintly. He shook his head. It seemed he could still hear the thin note of the devices.

"You have seen," Hy Jonsey said. "You may take the lenses off."

He slid them off, staring at the two people, his forehead wrinkled. "Now I get why it must have weight," he muttered. "To move level is easier than to lift. If it moves such a weight level—!"

"It will have to lift more weight," Hy Jonsey replied. "If we get rightly the words the First Council wrote."

"You calculate it will do that?"

They nodded, not easily, but with reserve. But, overriding the reserve, with confidence.

It was another touch on him, he reasoned, as he went back to his truck. Here, more than any place, he must be sure the enemy could not come. He lifted the second button of his shirt, and began giving his instructions. When he had finished he could be sure that this house would have no unwelcome visitors.

There was no more he could do. Except wait. He waited. The days went by. Until, after ten of them, Plum Halsey returned from his journey across the hills. Coming, in obedience to the word of the Council, to speak to Top Squadman Son Sonjon.

"You speaked whom?" he was asked.

"To the chiefs." The trader shifted uncomfortably. "They speaked sweet," he said slowly, "but it was in my mind that this was what they wanted me to get. They speaked it was a good thing to change our goods without war. That Jonville wanted no more than this." A touch of the trader's make-up showed for one moment. Only to disappear. "It is in my mind that they speaked this not caring." He rubbed his nose in a worried fashion. "They gave more than they asked."

The squadman nodded. That was a plain sign. Jonville was generous because it no longer mattered.

Question upon question, and Plum Halsey's answers made this reasoning stronger. He had not gone out of Jonville. "They speaked that there was no need. That all their goods came to the city . . . No. I saw few fighters. Jonville was only women and children and old men . . . No. They speaked nothing of their new thought burning across the sky. Nor, in Jonville, did I see it. I saw it again only when I had come away. When I was on our side of the hills."

That, also, was fact. While the trader was in Jonville the new thought in the sky had ceased. In case the trader had seen close what Jonville did not desire him to see.

"You go back?" Son Sonjon asked.

Plum Halsey swallowed. "I do not wish now to go back," he admitted. "But the going was my own thought. I have put my own touch on me."

It could happen, the squadman thought, that Plum Halsey would not return again from his second visit to Jonville. That would be a loss for Plum Halsey's wife and his son. And for Newtown. Plum Halsey was a good man.

Not, he reflected with anger, as the days went by after Plum Halsey had gone the second time, not like Squadman Don

Sonjo. Who was speaking what seemed good to Squadman Don Sonjo, but which was not so good for Newtown. That it was not hard to get that Jonville was nearer to the rising than Newtown. Since Jonville had already a new thought which rose in the sky. That if Jonville was not stopped they would use their rising to destroy Newtown. So that, to escape this, Newtown should not wait, but war now. While they had rifles which would give them an easy war. It was not a good speak for a squadman, Son Sonjon thought. As the Council also thought, and had speaked to Squadman Don Sonjo. But had not silenced him. Nor those who heard him, and speaked that the Council should unsay its judgment.

The Top Squadman scowled. How was it that those who calculated so easily that Newtown should war did not calculate that Jonville might have other new thoughts also? How did they calculate? When it was clear enough for anyone to get that since none could calculate for sure how a war would go that none should speak too easily for war.

There was, he thought, more sense with those who had grown around their Jonner. Who had speaked when he had come first that Jonville hated him for asking was it not better if there were no war. Which was the very speak one sent by Jonville would calculate Newtown would look for him to speak. Which was the same line as Andas Godal. So it was not strange that Andas Godal had taken Dillon Dillun Ho for friend. So that Andas Godal came often to the house of Mas Halwell. Who also, from the reports of the hearers, was friend to the Jonner.

Top Squadman Son Sonjon moved in his chair. If Arna Halwell had not been what she was, shaped how she was, would the Jonner have remained? Would he still be content to wear the button on his shirt? So that the Council could hear him speak, and those with him. Did Newtown have reason for thanking the woman? Of whom many in Newtown speaked bad for the way in which her eyes looked, and her voice sang, and her body moved or was still. Though now it was for the Jonner alone that these things were. Which did not stop many from speaking bad of her for *that*. And of Mas Halwell who had not been more hard with her from the beginning. Although what Mas Halwell could have done, he, Top Squadman Son Sonjon, did not get.

All of which was not a first thing. The first thing was to calculate how much of what the listeners heard was true speak?

As when Dillon Dillun Ho answered Andas Godal : " If war is made by Jonville, must they not be stamped flat ? So that, *after* they get that Newtown can do worse, they get that Newtown does not wish to do worse."

And, again, when both Andas Godal and Mas Halwell had calculated that Newtown should not wait for war, but should speak quiet now, Dillon Dillun Ho had not been on their line. Speaking that the chiefs and the fighters and the people of Jonville would not hear this quiet word without first learning from a hard war.

The squadman rubbed his chin. What was he to get ? That the Jonner gave them a true speak ? Or was he on a Jonville line they did not get ? Which, when they did get, they would learn had hurt Newtown enough to make war easy for Jonville?

It was six days now that Plum Halsey had been gone the second time, and there was no word. Not from anywhere. All the days were the same, one after another. It seemed none worked now except him. He frowned, finishing the last report of the listeners, tapping his fingers on the table. It seemed that when the light came again Dillon Dillun Ho and Arna Halwell would walk in the pastures. They would take food, and the man would build a fire, and the girl would cook, and they would come back to the house of Mas Halwell before the dark came.

He would let them have this day, he thought. But if, when they came back, Dillon Dillun Ho did not come to him and speak true speak why he had killed the Jonner chief, and on all that had passed between them, then Dillon Dillun Ho would not walk out again with the girl. Until the Jonner calculated that he was tired of being locked in a cage.

He leaned back. Now that he had decided on a line he felt easier in his mind.

Smiling, he put the words of the listeners on one side, and took up the other work he had before him.

That was that day, and the day ended, and the dark came, and Newtown slept. Then it was light, and a messenger came banging on the Top Squadman's door.

" Speak," Top Squadman Son Sonjon commanded.

" From the hills. By long sender. When the light came in the valley below them they saw the bodies of three men. Through their lenses they could see the faces of the three. The faces of Plum Halsey and the two he took with him into

Jonville. The Jonners had laid them there in the dark for our post to see when the light came."

Top Squadman Son Sonjon's face was set. There was one thing only to be got from this. That Jonville was ready.

He lifted the second button. "You will bring the Jonner Dillon Dillun Ho to me," he ordered. "And Arna Halwell with him."

His face changed as he was answered. "The Jonner is not in the house. Nor the woman either. Nor did those posted know they had passed."

Chapter Six

"It is in my mind that we shall have this day alone," Dillon breathed when Arna woke under his hand.

She sighed, and slid her arm up around his neck. "You have a nice mind," she murmured. "But, how will you do that?" She chuckled. "Will you blind the watchers when we walk past them?"

"The dark does that," Dillon answered. "The light has not yet come."

"Oh!" She twisted to see the window. "H'm," she said. Then laughed, and pressed him away. "If you will let me rise," she told him, "we shall play as you have in mind."

She slipped from the couch, and moved, feeling her way, to where her clothes lay folded. While Dillon sat upon her couch, smiling happily, unobserved. In the blackness his hand went up to the button, swathed in cloth, and his mouth widened.

"I am ready," Arna whispered.

She felt his hand, gripped it, and let him guide her. Down the stairway to the window he had used before. Where he stopped, to lift the package they had prepared, and which he had put here in readiness.

"Softly," he warned. He slid through the gap without noise. Then the hand came back, and the girl, holding her breath, came through to stand upon the ground outside. Together, moving as his body directed, they trod across the open.

For the man it was no more than an exercise. He felt the ground through his feet, recognised each successive, confirming feature. The hard earth. The rough soil. The patch of pebbly ground they must skirt with care. Infinitely patient, he

navigated them through the hazards that would signal, if disturbed, that something moved in the dark. For Arna, lost within ten anxious steps, it was a delicate miracle. That she must not, *must not*, smash with her straining, clumsy imitation of her lover's skill.

On she followed. And on.

Then a band of light was across the dark, and they halted, and soon she knew where they were. She shook her head. "How you did this!" she said.

He grinned. "This day is the best use I have found for what I was taught," he said. He shifted the package he carried. "They will come to find us when we are missed," he reminded her. "This place you speaked was good—"

She took his hand. "We go this way," she said, and led the way between the trees.

If Top Squadman Son Sonjon was incensed at what they had done their trail would not be hard to track Dillon told himself. They would not seek to hide it. Not, he thought fondly, that Arna could have done. But, he asked himself, what cause was there for anger? They did no hurt to Newtoun this day. He put all these thoughts from him. This day would not be spoiled. This day was hers. He slid his arm about her, laughing, and she laughed up at him, and they breasted the slope in lively manner.

Over the crest, and down, ankle deep in shrubs and flowers. Across a stream. Then climbing once again. Three times they did this.

"When we come to the next top," she told him, "there is the spring of the stream we crossed. With shade. The only shade on the top, and better because of that."

"That is your good place?"

"You will calculate this also." Arna put on a threatening face. "And if you speak it is not so, I will hold you under the spring to die."

"I am feared," Dillon answered agreeably. "After this, I will speak only what you wish me to speak. Always. For fear of your anger."

She nodded approval of such excellent sentiment, and they climbed the last part of the approach.

On the level she flung out her arm. "There!" she showed.

They walked forward slowly. There were the trees, grouped about her spring, surging up brilliant and pure, to overflow, and run away, busting over the edge of the table.

He laid their package down, and straightened, looking across the top of the hill, flat and wide. Out beyond it, to where the bigger hills rose, jagged and grim, to bar the way to his kinsmen. Who were no longer his kinsmen. His eyes came back to the girl, so soft, so firm, with her lazy, blinking eyes, and the curves of her, and his own eyes lit and glowed.

"This day," he said, his voice coming deep and rough. "This place. Your place."

Now his arms were holding her, and hers were gripping him, and they saw nothing, felt nothing, knew nothing but each other.

Until, together, their heads lifted, and turned, and they saw the shapes rising from behind the far hills. Saw them growing in size, heard their sound growing louder.

Instinctively they crouched, making themselves small in the hollow, peering from behind the slender trunks of the frail trees that were no more than saplings.

"The new thought that burns in the sky," Arna stammered.

They could see the flame behind the leading things that grew hideously larger now.

Dillon's wits were clearing. His hands clawed at the cloth he had twisted around the button. His fingers shook, and he felt panic that he might do the long speaker harm.

"They are coming here," Arna whispered.

Only in time did his hands clutch her, holding her from springing up to flee. "We are hid here," he grated.

She turned her head, staring at him. "You?" she asked.

"No!" His hands tightened. "No!" he whispered fiercely. "I am as feared as you," he swore.

Her mouth trembled. "Your hands are feared," she said. "I feel them."

"Yes." He lifted those hands, looked at them, nodded once more. "But—" He forced himself to hold his fingers steady, twisting the last fold from the button.

He held it clear, as close to his lips as he might. "Dillon Dillun Ho speaks," he said. "And Arna Halwell. From the spring—"

She understood. She leaned to him. "The spring on Table Hill," she said urgently into the button.

"The new thought from Jonville comes here," Dillon reported.

There was a crashing and a cloud a little before them. Clods, stones, turf exploded, flying in the air. The first new thought was sliding to a stop. Another. A third. The side piece of the third had broken, and it span. Almost to the edge of the table. Then stopped. Others were coming down behind these three. There was din, the crashing of the landings, the roar of the flame from them.

Out of the three in front came men. Jonner fighters, with their rifles thrust before them. Moving forward. Coming towards the spring.

"If they give me time to speak them," Dillon mouthed, "I will speak that they come to Newtown on the side farthest from the hills. That Newtown is open on that side, without posts for fighters."

He looked once at Arna Halwell. Touched her once. Then, looking forward at the Jonners very close now, he stood up, holding a hand up, fingers spread.

One man, seeing movement, fired. Doing no hurt. Then all halted. Leaning forward, still, puzzled to see one of their own people where they had not looked to find one.

"Dillon Dillun Ho," Dillon called. "By order of Jonville. Who leads this war?"

"The Jon himself," one answered.

Dillon nodded. He reached his hand back, lifted Arna. "Take us to him," he commanded.

There were whistles. One of the fighters, the marks of a small chief on his forehead, prowled forward. "You bring a good offering," he grinned. "I will take it while you go speak the Jon."

Coldly Dillon smiled. "Is that how you calculate?" he asked. Very softly. He put out his hand, tapping the man's chest. "I will speak you something," he said. "Lift your gurk's eyes higher than the ground she treads on, and the Jon himself will take time over your dying."

The small chief halted, his face black. Slowly, in the face of the spy's menacing calm, he drew aside. "Go through," he choked.

"With two of your squad," Dillon replied. He lifted a finger to the two nearest. "You," he said. "And you." He touched the nearer man. "You will go with speed to the Jon. Speaking that we follow with the word he needs." He looked at his second choice. "You before us," he instructed. "To clear a way for us."

"Will they hear?" Arna's voice, pitched low, just reached his ears.

He nodded an assurance he could only assume. "They will hear," he answered boldly. "It was planned for them to hear."

The Jonners around them could take it he spoke of the invaders' leaders. He could only hope that the listeners in Newtown had not been called to other posts to help defend the city. If that had happened what he had in mind to suggest would destroy that which he schemed to save.

The new thoughts were all down now. Though not all had come down safely. There were men who screamed, pinned under flaming craft; or squirmed along the ground, striving to crawl further from the flames which licked after them. There were men who walked, twisted, with faces that spoke they would not walk much farther. There were others who lay, and did not move at all. But, out-numbering these, were many who moved fast, carrying their weapons eagerly, crowding towards the edge of the table nearest to Newtown. Or drove the trucks which the new thoughts had carried in their bellies towards the edge of the table. So that the fighter who went ahead of the two must use his weight and his voice to clear a way for them.

Then, eventually, they stopped. Where the one Dillon had sent ahead was coming back. Walking with respect before one who held himself high, and followed by others equally proud, if not so aloof.

"Speak," the Jon commanded.

Did Newtown hear him still, Dillon wondered. Had they ever heard of him?

He began to weave the thread which would entangle the invader. Provided that his man before him accepted his tale. Provided Newtown's listeners, if they still listened, could move their fighters to bar the route Dillon had in mind.

"Newtown's fighters hold the hills," he told the ruler of Jonville. "Whom you have passed over. But who will now be coming back with speed to hold the posts which lie on three sides of the city." He pointed. "If the war comes to Newtown on the side farthest from the hills, where it has never looked for war—!"

He looked round at the assembled might of Jonville, the men on foot, the men packing the new, lighter trucks which he

had never seen before, which had clearly been built especially for this war. Looked back at the Jon.

"If we move the way I speak," he said, "it is a longer way. But quicker. Since that way we meet the road from Newtown to the sea. Along which the trucks will then move swiftly. Before Newtown can move its fighters for a war behind them."

One of the chiefs beside the Jon spoke. "That you were sent to learn from Newtown we have not put out of our minds," he said. "But what of the word which was to return to us? Why did this not come?"

"The word I gave to Gild Balk Lan," Dillon threw out his hand. "Because Gild Balk Lan was found by Newtown, and was killed." He let a faint note of censure show in his voice. "It was not well calculated to send only one man to hear the word I found, and to carry it back alone. So that we who worked for Jonville had our hands bound."

"We," the Jon repeated, and now his eyes, and the eyes of all the chiefs, moved to look upon Arna. "We?"

"We," Dillon repeated. "This one and myself. This one who stood between me and Newtown to serve Jonville." He put all he had into his final throw. "Whom I ask the Jon shall join me with, and only me, for the work we have done."

The fierce eyes flashed. "Only! Not even a small chief, and you ask that."

Unabashed Dillon gave him back look for look. "After this war," he said, "if it gives Newtown to the Jon, will Dillon Dillun Ho be not even a small chief?"

To defiance such as this, before all Jonville, there could be only one answer. If the Jon were not to be despised by all Jonville. The fierce eyes took on a sardonic look. "It must be as Dillon Dillun Ho speaks," he allowed.

Sub chiefs, at a word from the ruler, hurried to the force. Which swung, obediently, away from the direct route to Newtown, dipped over the end of the table, and took the path Dillon Dillun Ho had indicated.

A hand touched Dillon's shoulder. One of the chiefs motioned him and Arna to a waiting truck. "You both ride with us," he instructed.

They climbed on without comment, and the truck lurched forward, speeding for the head of the column. They clung on, riding the bumps as best they might, as the driver of the truck forced his vehicle along the line. Bruised and battered, they

won to the front, and the pace slowed. The chief twisted back to face them. "Now?" he demanded.

"There," Arna's hand pointed forward. "Beside the hill. Between that hill and the one after. Bending that way. Then, when it grows flat, bending the other way. After this, the road to the sea lies before us. Up that road we will come to Newtown. Between the small hills which shield Newtown's back from sight of the sea."

If Newtown's listeners heard, Dillon told himself, they must get where their defence should be. If they moved in time. If they did not move in time then Newtown was finished.

The line of trucks twisted behind them, truck close to truck. The thread, filled with death, which he had spun. Only, was it death to Newtown, or death to Jonville. Whichever it was, it was odds that it was death to him and to Arna Halwell. He remembered again the word of the Council when he first came to Newtown. That if bad came to him it would be of himself. Well, that was a true speak. From the beginning, when he had speaked that he would toss on this play, all that had come had been from himself. If what came was death, that was from himself also. But, if death came, let it come to her quick.

"We shall be first to Newtown," Arna cried. Her voice trembled, but her face was not the face of one filled with fear. She turned her face to Dillon, looking at him with meaning. "We are in the first of the line of trucks," she said again.

If Newtown heard, it would get what she had in mind. It would give them that much odds of living, Dillon conceded. Yet he could not take much count of those odds. The men in the trucks behind them would surely get how they came to lie in a trap. The chief with them in this truck, and the driver, would they not also get it, and act?

His eyes came down to the chief, and saw the wonder in the chief's eyes. At this woman of Newtown, who was so soft, yet rode to war and showed no fear.

"Your one," the chief asked. "Are the others of Newtown like your one?"

"I cannot speak to that," Dillon answered, knowing pride that she should show so well. He gave utterance to this pride. "I do not calculate that there are any such. Not even in Jonville."

The other was silent. Then, "Your sons will also be chiefs," he said at last, and at these words the girl flushed, and one hand

left the bar to which they clung, and came down again on Dillon's hand. She turned her head also, and looked at the chief who had seen this, and she smiled. Then lifted her head once more to look to the path they followed.

"How far?" the chief demanded.

"Where the path bends, then turns the other way. After that we come to the road."

All their eyes were one way now. For the first sight of the road they would take to pull Newtown down. To stamp it flat. To write the end of a story that had lasted more than a hundred years.

"The road," Arna said.

If Newtown listened, Dillon thought, they will calculate how soon we shall come in sight. How long they still have in which to prepare their welcome. If they have not listened, how short a time they will have before they fall.

Chapter Seven

They were on the road, were racing up it. Before them, a long way still, were the last, small hills which hid their prize. The road bent to the right, curving round largely. So that they travelled, for a space, not towards the hills, but sideways to them. The trucks filled the road, so that from a distance it must appear that the whole road, where it curved, moved.

It was then that Newtown gave the fighters from across the hills their welcome. From all along the small, distant hills. Light sparked, raced towards them, fell upon them. Flashed, and flashed again. And again a third time.

There was noise. Trucks crashing one into another where the drivers had been killed by the light from the rifles Hy Jonsey had dreamed. Which the Council had copied, and had issued to the fighters of Newtown. Which, striking over a distance the rifles of Jonville could not answer, struck down the Jonners. Struck their trucks, setting some in flames, setting them to drive without hands, spilling themselves and the men in them, or ploughing into and over other men who had leaped to the ground for safety. And found death.

There were those who lived. Those who had fallen, or had leaped, to have the trucks between them and the hills where Newtown's rifles lay concealed. Now these ones, still the greater part of those who had come over the hills, crouched,

holding their weapons, asking themselves what came next. As Dillon did, gripping the rifle he had snatched from one who would not use it again.

Now, in obedience to an imperious signal, he made a plunging run along the line to where the Jon kneeled for shelter. Faced those furious eyes, and the menacing looks of those about him.

"Speak," he was commanded.

He shook his head. "I do not get this," he answered. "There are no posts on this fourth side of Newtown."

"And those rifles that are beyond ours?"

"The rifles their fighters carried are as ours," Dillon swore. "Not better."

"If these are not rifles," a chief growled. "If these are a new thought kept hid until now. As we kept our new thought hid when their traders came to Jonville."

The Jon nodded slowly. "In the light," he said, "here and now, they see us. Stopping us from coming to them. So every man will make himself small. Until the dark comes, when we shall change this."

Gratefully Dillon effaced himself, made his way back to the end of the line. To lie under the threat of Newtown's reach for the rest of the day. Grimly silent at first. But, as time wore past, when it was clear that Newtown could not hurt them more where they lay protected by the trucks, their spirits rose. If they could not go forward in the light, it was plain that Newtown feared to come close to them, since Newtown made no move. When the dark came, they told themselves, they would come close to Newtown, and the end would be as it had been planned. Only delayed a little. Not worse than that.

Until, too late, they got what was in Newtown's mind. When, from behind them, and from the sides, Newtown's rifles flashed on them again. Not on their bodies pressed against the earth, but on the trucks behind which they had sheltered. Tearing holes in them, setting them on fire, exploding their stores.

Then ceased.

"Something moves in the hills," the chief beside Dillon muttered. "They have given us word that we are ringed. Now I calculate they come to speak us." His hands tightened on his rifle. "Our war ends here," he said dully. He turned his head to look down the line. "It will be for the Jon to speak how it ends."

They lay while a truck came from the shelter of the hills until it reached a spot where a fortunate shot might just carry, and there it halted. There was only one man in the truck. This man descended, walked clear of the truck, and stood, arms wide, showing he came unarmed. Along the Jonner line heads turned in to the centre. What would the Jon speak to this ?

Slowly, while they bit upon their lips, the Jon stood. Moved out. In front of the trucks, out of cover. Three chiefs moved with him, empty handed also. The four began to walk up the road.

The small, distant figure climbed back into his truck, set it rolling. It slid forward, came swiftly to where the Jon had halted, and drew up before him. Once again the man in the truck descended.

"A squadman," the chief commented.

Dillon said nothing. Nor did Arna Jonsey. Only looked at each other in silence. Somehow, for no reason they could name, they were uneasy. Since it was Squadman Don Sonjo whom Newtown had sent to speak Newtown's terms to the enemy.

The parley finished. The speakers raised their hands in salute. The squadman climbed back. The truck swung round, and went away. And the Jon with his three chiefs came back, walking with bowed heads.

Before the barricade the leader stopped, facing his ranks. That rose, man after man, crowding through the gaps between the trucks, climbing over them. To hear the word of the Jon.

"I have speaked we end this war," he told them. "For our lives. That we will return to Jonville, leaving our arms. That Newtown fighters come to Jonville to be sure that we do not calculate to war again."

The mens' teeth showed, and he held up his hand to quiet them. "Newtown speaks us soft," he said. "Offering us, when we have proved our hearts for good, all the new thought they have learned. So that we should join them to win to the stars."

They stared, not crediting how this could be. Defeated, they were offered all that they had made war to take.

"I have speaked that we will hear this," the Jon said. "That Jonville will not unsay what I have speaked. If Newtown does not unsay their own word."

They nodded, man by man. They would hold this word t heir Jon had given.

"One thing only they demand." The Jon's voice took on an ominous note. "That the two who led us to take Newtown must be given to them, their hands bound. Alive. For Newtown to judge."

A mutter rippled along the ranks, and grew. The fighters were incensed. This did not suit with what had gone before. How then had the Jon not speaked that this should not be?

"It is not as you calculate." There was a weariness about the leader. A sadness. And anger also. "The squadman they sent speaked more. It can happen that he did not calculate that we got what was behind his speak. That this was no fair war for Jonville from the moment when we chose this other road to come to Newtown."

All eyes were on the two; eyes filled with understanding and hate.

"That is why Newtown speaks they go bound. So that we will calculate they are for discipline. So that we shall not get they are not on our line. So that they come with their lives out of our hands." He nodded. "I have speaked that this is how they will go to Newtown. So—do that. But—not more than that. Until I speak again."

Swiftly the fighters nearest to the two moved, seizing them, dragging their hands behind them, binding them tightly. Then, held them, waiting for the word of the Jon.

"I have speaked that they will have their lives. Jonville will not unsay this." He came forward, reached out, drew Dillon's knife from his belt, passed it to the nearest man. "We have made a bad war because we came the road he saw for us. It is right that this road should be the last thing he sees."

But, as the point of the knife came up, the last thing Dillon saw was Arna.

Through his pain the voice of the Jon came inexorably. "For this one, for who's face he has unsayed his people, with his knife make her face so that she will not again change another's mind."

Newtown's rifles closed in on either hand as the Jonners, marching unarmed, came to the hills. Where the Jon, leading them into the grip of Newtown, halted, and raised his arm high, and Jonville's column halted also. To push the two bound persons from their ranks. Contemptuously, flinging them towards their conquerors, to trip, and fall before the feet of Top Squadman Son Sonjon.

"As we speaked." The voice of brass rang in the hot, bitter air. "Bound. And with their lives."

Of all Newtown, only Squadman Don Sonjo smiled at what they saw.

Gratefully Top Squadman Son Sonjon, Newtown's Captain in Jonville, removed his helmet and undid his belt. Then let himself sink into his chair. The dark had come, and the Jon was gone into the dark. By his own hand, before his own people. And, with him, the three chiefs who had gone up the road to speak with the squadman Newtown had sent to them. Who's word they had heard that their war was lost.

Since it was they who had heard Newtown's word, both for themselves and for those they had led, the Jon had speaked that it was this they should do. Both for themselves and for the people of Jonville. That, after they had died, the people of Jonville could hold to the word they had given to Newtown, and not feel small, since they who had gone into the dark had paid the price of this word.

In this way, therefore, it was done. Between a row of the fighters of Jonville, armed with the new rifles Newtown had given, and a row of Newtown's fighters on the other side. With the people of Jonville behind the fighters, the women, and the children, and the old men who were fighters no longer.

Then, afterwards, when he, Top Squadman Son Sonjon had lifted his hand to those who lay upon the ground, the women had come forward to lift them, and carry them away.

That was the end. The end of the Jon, and the end of the wars between Newtown and Jonville, and, after this, there would be only one people.

It had taken a long time to come to this, and many men and women had died for it. Now no more would die. Except, perhaps, two more. A man who's eyes had been destroyed in his head, and who might not wish to live thus. And a woman who's beauty had been spoiled, and who, also, might not wish to live.

Unless they could be so strong in each other. He shook his head. He did not calculate how that could be. Not from the word he had from Jone Jonsey, into who's care they had been given. Although that was how all Newtown wanted it, their hearts being soft towards these two.

Because of this softness it was well for both Newtown and Jonville that the Jon had died. Who had ordered this thing

done. It would be well for Squadman Don Sonjo if he also went into the dark. Since it was his tongue which had let the Jon calculate how his war was lost.

Newtown's Captain frowned. It was the calculation of Newtown that Squadman Don Sonjo had speaked with small care. Not worse than this. It was not how he, the Top Squadman, calculated. Which was that Squadman Don Sonjo's speak was always that which would bring him good. As here, so that those who had won the war for Newtown should not be made big for what they had done. As Squadman Don Sonjo ached to be big, and who had been cheated of his dream because there would be no more war.

Who wanted more war ?

Top Squadman Son Sonjon looked again at what he had calculated. He could not find that he had calculated wrong. It *was* as he had calculated. That Squadman Don Sonjo would do what he could to unsay this peace, and make another war. That would grow him bigger than anyone in Newtown. Bigger than the Council.

Who had no mind for the peace, and the rising, since these did not make him big. Who would spoil these things for what he calculated was a first thing with him.

Newtown's Captain pulled himself up out of his chair. With what was in his mind he must go back to Newtown. That was where the seeds of discontent had been planted. By one man. Who would water these seeds, and work to set them spreading. Who, from the word Newtown's Captain had heard, was busy now with his watering of these seeds. When the light came he would go. To speak the Council on this new, dangerous, first thing.

He was heard with interest. Without argument. Then, when he had finished ; " It can happen as you have calculated," they answered. " But, it is only calculation. On that the squadman may not be called to judgment. Only if, as a squadman, he unsays the word of the Council."

" It is in my mind that he has done that," Son Sonjon persisted. " When he let the Jon get that those two were on Newtown's line. That it was in his mind that the Jon should get this. That he *speaked* this to the Jon. Plainly. Letting the Jon get that he speaked because he was made small that the war should be won by speak that was not true."

" The Jon speaked that he *calculated* this," they pointed out.

Son Sonjon growled. "That is how the Jon would speak. How I, if I were the Jon, would have speaked. As a fighter. To save another fighter who speaked the whole story because he was made small for a war to be won, not by fighters, but by not-true speak."

The Council shrugged. "The Jon is dead. There is not one left who can speak if your calculation is good."

There was no argument he could bring to alter this ruling. Nevertheless, he could be satisfied that he had not wasted his time. The Council was not asleep. If Squadman Don Sonjo was ever fool enough to go beyond the word of the Council, it was Top Squadman Son Sonjon who would give judgment on him. There was hope that Don Sonjo would be forced to go beyond the word of the Council. If it was in his mind to spread trouble between Newtown and Jonville.

He climbed into his truck, taking the road to the house of Hy Jonsey. Don Sonjo he thought grimly, was not the only one who could lay plans. He, also, had a plan.

Jone greeted him at the door, smiling. "Have they driven you out of Jonville already?" she asked.

He chuckled. "Has the word spread so fast?" he retorted. "Then you will get that I have come to this house for shelter. To join your others." He looked round the room. "I do not see the others."

Her smile went. "They do not show themselves," she answered.

"They are so bad?"

"It is what is in their minds," Jone told him. "The hurt in him for what was done to her. For which he takes all blame. The hurt in her mind. That if she had not speaked they go to that place, his eyes would not have been taken."

Son Sonjon frowned. "Is this Newtown's medicine woman who speaks?" he growled. He hit one hand against the other. "I do not ask that you give this man back his eyes. That is his price for what he has done. No. But, it is in you to give him back his heart."

She shook her head. "They will not hear," she replied.

"They will hear me," Son Sonjon assured her. "They will take my speak for discipline. Now."

She turned. She led the way. To a room in which two people sat. A man who lifted shrunken pits in a face carved thin, and a woman who wore a mask from brow to chin. Who

did not rise when Son Sonjon came through the door, nor gave one sign that they were cheered at his coming.

He did not permit this to deter him. "You will hear what I speak," he opened. "You will calculate whom I am, and the work I am touched to do. You will get that you also are touched."

"By whom?" Dillon's tone was flat.

"By Hy Jonsey when you first came to Newtoun. By Arna Halwell when she speaked that you and she were what you were. By your mind when you took Newtoun's line to work for good between Jonville and Newtoun."

"We have paid already for that touch," Dillon answered.

"The first part only," Son Sonjon corrected. "The work you did, if left now, will fail. Worse than if you had not done what you did."

"How?" There was a flicker of interest.

"That I will speak when you put away your weakness," he was told.

Deliberately the squadman turned, crossed the room. To stand before Arna. "When you were given back to Newtoun," he told her, "I put my hands on your face. To learn how deep the knife had cut. Now I will learn how well what has been done will be undone. Take off the cloth."

"No," Arna whispered, and Dillon growled a warning.

They had not reckoned Son Sonjon could move so fast. Until his hand flashed, and the mask was gone, ripped from her face. His hand came back, gripping her wrists so she could not lift her hands to hide her shame.

"So." Unmoved Newtoun's Captain stared at the scars, easily his other hand took Dillon, sliding forward, and held him despite his straining.

"You will hear me on this," Son Sonjon said. "My discipline touches you. For the work I have in mind. Which is for those who are strong." He stepped back, releasing them. "Be still now while Jone Jonsey speaks what her light will do."

He waved Newtoun's healer to the patient. Waited while her fingers moved across the scars. Until she turned, and nodded.

"To leave no mark," Jone Jonsey promised. "After a little pain, and a little time."

A sound came from Dillon, of pain and hope, and Arna sprang, seizing him, and was seized.

Son Sonjon snorted. "You will not again think crazy of blame for what is not your blame," he commanded. "Until I return you will hear all that Jone Jonsey speaks. Is that heard?"

"Dillon?" Arna pleaded. "His eyes—?" She came to Son Sonjon, her hands upon his chest. Behind her, in pity, Jone Jonsey shook her head.

"If it were with us," Son Sonjon said. "With any of us. But it is not." He put out his great arm, laying it on Dillon's shoulder. "That is your price to buy this peace. And ours also, for we are one clan now. The clan you have made with your price. Which all Newtoun pays with you in its heart for you. As Jonville will when it gets what has been done."

His face grew hard again. His hand came down, gripping Dillon's arm. His fingers sank into that arm. "Soft," he growled. "When I come again I will want a strong arm. It can happen that a fighter who does not have eyes is the best fighter in the dark. Is *that* heard?"

Dillon's breath made a hissing noise. "I had not calculated—"

"Then calculate now," Son Sonjon advised. "Waking and sleeping." He stepped back. "That I must come myself to teach what you crazy ones should already have learned," he grumbled.

But deceived none of them, as he saw when he looked back from the doorway.

Chapter Eight

In the passage Hy Jonsey stood waiting for him. "Top Squadman!" he commented. "Or is it Top Healer you aim at?" He struck Son Sonjon's shoulder. "A good speak," he commended. "Now you will come heal me."

Son Sonjon's eyebrows rose. "How?"

"Are you Top Squadman?" Hy Jonsey asked. "Who speaks if it is war or not war?"

"It is not war," Son Sonjon assured him.

"Then the works I need I can have. That I am not speaked the things I need must be held in case of war."

"By whom?"

"Pal Halsey's son speaks in his father's place. That he must hold his stores. If he has learned from one who has a true word that war comes again—!"

Son Sonjon nodded. He could calculate who such a one would be to pass such a word to Pal Halsey's son. He went out to his truck, and drove back to the Council House, well pleased. He had Squadman Don Sonjo now.

But, coming there, he heard what did not please him. Squadman Don Sonjo had spoken that Newtown's touch be lifted from him as a fighter. There was a peace made. There was, then, no need for fighters. He, Don Sonjo, was minded to grow big. If Newtown's touch on him as a fighter was lifted it was in his mind to speak for a place on the Council. For the people to choose between him and one of the three now on the Council.

"And?" Top Squadman Son Sonjon asked.

"It is done as he asks. Now he is Don Sonjo, and his own man."

How much his own man Newtown's Captain was to learn. Beginning with a word here, and a word there. That now peace was come a man who wanted to be big, since it was in him to be big, not for himself but for Newtown, such a man would be of most use on the Council. Which had need of those who cared for dreams only if they worked. Peace was a dream, but a dream was not good if it worked only for a little, and then stopped. It was good only if it worked for always. It was for this reason he offered himself.

Soon the word was sharper. There was good dreaming in the Council. Not stamping flat those who made the last war was a dream. If that worked, it was a good dream. But, suppose those who had not been stamped flat had another war in mind. He did not speak that they had. But, if such could happen, had it been such a good dream to give them freely of the new thought?

The word came that there were those in Newtown who had begun to hear Don Sonjo.

"He is big," Andas Godal admitted when he came to Jonville. The small man's eyes were not merry. "He makes himself bigger by making those who hear him feared. Of what can happen. Of what will happen if his speak is heard on this side of the hills."

"It is already heard," Son Sonjon answered. "The chiefs ask what is Newtown's mind? Does Newtown unsay its word? Does Newtown not calculate that Jonville will also unsay if Newtown does."

"And?" Andas Godal leaned forward.

"I have spoken that Newtoun does not unsay. That it is in my mind they should not be feared. That in a little while, it will be in my hand as well as my mind."

The small, dark man stiffened. "Was that wise?" he asked.

Newtoun's Captain nodded. "You and one other will make this come good," he said. "Now hear me on this."

Andas Godal took his task back to Newtoun, sought out Dillon as Son Sonjon had ordered. Brought the blind man's answer back to Jonville.

"Dillon speaks that he takes your touch," he reported. "That he has already taken it. Going out and about the streets in the light. Learning them. Going again in the dark to be sure he has learned them. Also he thanks you for the knife you sent."

"And Arna Halwell."

Andas Godal brightened. "Now, there *is* something!" he exclaimed. "The word was that she had been made something a man would hide his eyes from. That was not true speak."

"It *was*," Son Sonjon assured him. "But, if I hear you, it is not true speak now."

"As I calculate," Andas Godal said, "our Jonner pays the highest price in Newtoun. Being the only man who does not see what every man turns his head for."

Son Sonjon nodded. "Her being so will make our Jonner stronger," he commented. He turned to the other matter which was in his mind all the time. To which this more personal business was not more than an accessory. Although, in his plan, an important accessory. "How builds Hy Jonsey's dream?" he asked.

"Slow!" Andas Godal bit the word off with anger. "Too slow. The council holds back more each day. As more people speak over what Don Sonjo speaks. That it is not wise to use what may be needed if peace fails." He set his chin in his hand. "When I came this time, the meeting to choose if Don Sonjo wins to the Council was set for seven days."

"A day to come here," Son Sonjon counted. "This day. One day to give my work to the second squadman. A day for me to go to Newtoun. Four days. Three days only in which to work. Three darks. Is that enough for you to do the work?"

Andas Godal stood. "If I go now," he said, "I win another day."

"Go then," Son Sonjon told him.

Newtown, the Top Squadman, found, had changed. The Council, also, had changed. Hearing him more slowly. He came away from the Council House with a face set in heavy lines.

Coming to his truck, he halted. To look across the street at Don Sonjo, speaking to a gathering. Standing easily with men about him who smiled when he caught their eye, and heard each word he spoke, some of them even before he finished speaking. He did not speak anything which would upset Son Sonjon's ideas. More grim than before, Newtown's Captain climbed into his truck, barked a command to his driver.

Coming to the barracks, choosing the men he had in mind, making sure that each man understood what his task would be, Son Sonjon's eyes kept moving to the window. Where, across the roofs of Newtown, the tall, thin shape of Hy Jonsey's dream was growing.

Finishing his orders, he took a lens from his table, rested his arms upon the sill, and got the image clear. Looking at this work, remembering the pictures their fathers had brought away from Shiptoun, the Top Squadman felt excitement. Hy Jonsey's new thought was not so far from finishing. If Don Sonjo were not chosen, Hy Jonsey would finish quickly. If Don Sonjo won, it could happen that this new thought would never finish, would be stripped for changing into things for war. His hands tightened on the lens. It was his touch to make sure that Don Sonjo did not win. It was his touch to make sure that Newtown and Jonville should win their way to the stars together.

The dark was coming now, and he moved away from the window. The men he had chosen were waiting him below, and he went down, and climbed into his truck. Then his truck, and the other trucks with the men he had chosen, swung out into the street, and drove towards the house of Don Sonjo. Not all the way. But near. Where they climbed out, and faded into the dark that was now over all Newtown.

There were lights in the houses along the road, and they took their line from these. Walking without speech. Until they came to the corner house, and a voice whispered to them, and they halted.

"Andas Godal?"

"It is. And all is as you speaked."

Son Sonjon grunted. "You will move as you heard my word," he addressed those with him, and they trod away on that order.

"This hand," Andas Godal said, and Son Sonjon moved with him along the road. "In here," the small sounder directed, and they turned as one man.

A door opened, and they entered. To find others waiting. The Three of Newtoun's Council, and with them others, Hy Jonsey and Dillon Dillun Ho. To the last one Son Sonjon went.

"If there is no other way," Son Sonjon told him, "you will use your knife. Your life is on this, and your life is not your own only. This is a first thing, and you will hear me on this."

"I hear," Dillon answered.

"Then go," Son Sonjon commanded. He laid one hand on the Jonner's arm, then stepped back, and the blind man went smoothly to the door, opened it without noise, and was gone.

"Now," Andas Godal said, "we wait a space."

They waited as he said. Then, when he put his hand to certain instruments on the table, they stiffened, watching what he did. He moved one screw among the instruments on the table.

To their ears, from the instruments, came a voice, angry and surprised. Don Sonjo's voice. "By crash!" Don Sonjo cursed, "what happens here?"

Out of the instruments came a sound. A door that opened, and closed, and a bar that slid home on the closing. And the voice of Dillon Dillun Ho. "I have taken your light," the voice of Dillon Dillun Ho answered Don Sonjo. "I am Dillon Dillun Ho, and I have put you in the dark. As you put me in the dark through the Jon. For which I have brought my knife to take your price for what you did to me."

"No!" There was a blundering and a crashing. Then the laughter of Dillon Dillun Ho. It was not good laughter, and the listeners swallowed together. "No!" Don Sonjo's voice was loud, and shrill, and full of fear. "No!"

"Yes," Dillon told him. They heard him laugh again. "Your door does not open, Don Sonjo. That, also, I have done." They heard another sound, a slapping sound, over and over, quickly made. "That is my knife, Don Sonjo. On my hand."

"No!" Don Sonjo's voice was thick now.

"I am coming to you," Dillon said.

The minds of the listeners built the picture their ears heard. Of the two alone in the dark. Of one man with a knife who had

never feared the dark, and another man, unarmed, to whom the dark was an enemy.

"Your tongue first," Dillon said softly. "Your tongue that speaked the Jon so that I can never return to Jonville."

"I will unsay it," Don Sonjo yelled. Into the darkness in which a fighter without eyes was his master. "I will unsay what I speaked."

"What will you unsay?"

"That the Jon should learn that it was planned by you. As a fighter to a fighter I speaked this. That as a fighter he would not speak that he had heard this from me as true speak. But would speak only that he had calculated it."

He babbled on. And on. Then fell silent. In the house across the street Andas Godal's hand again moved the screw on his instruments, and the listeners knew that the light had come back to the room in which Don Sonjo crouched against the wall. And, with the light, came the fighters Son Sonjon had stationed around the house. To take the man who, with his own mouth, had speaked that he had gone beyond the line of the Council at a time when he was touched to take the line of the Council.

In the room across the street Top Squadman Son Sonjon faced the Council. "You may calculate my discipline will not be easy," he told them.

"He will have Council judgment," the Three answered. "He is not a squadman now. He is not for your discipline, but for ours." They moved, together, to the door. "In ten days," they instructed, "you will bring him where we speak. Well. In no way hurt."

They were gone. Leaving Son Sonjon, doubting his own ears, turning from the door to Andas Godal, to Hy Jonsey, who's eyes looked back at him, drained and set, and not as he had ever seen them before. He stared at them, puzzled as to why they should look like this.

"You get what is in their minds?" he asked finally.

"As you will," Andas Godal told him, and said no more.

There was this to do. There was that. There was word to be sent to the chiefs in Jonville that the promise of Newtown had been made safe. There was Dillon to see. Dillon who wore a quiet now which had not been his before. Who heard Son Sonjon. But showed no pleasure as Top Squadman Son Sonjon had calculated he would show.

"It is finished. It was the touch you put on me for both Newtown and Jonville. For the rising to be made safe. For my mind to get that I was more than only my eyes. It is not more than that. But for that I am grateful."

Baffled, Son Sonjo left the blind man and the woman who stood beside him, her arm on his shoulder.

Were they all gone, crazy?

Then it was the tenth day, and the summons of the Council came to him. Then he got what was in the mind of the Council for its judgment, and he had it in him to pity Don Sonjo. Whom the fighters brought Don Sonjo to where the Council waited, with all Newtown, and the chiefs of Jonville. Beside the ship Hy Jonsey had built for the rising.

"The judgment of the Council," it was proclaimed. "The judgment of Newtown and of Jonville sitting together. On one who had no mind for peace between Newtown and Jonville. On one who had no mind for the rising which has been the heart of Jonville and of Newtown since the days of the First Council. On one who would kill both peace and the rising by putting fear into the minds of both people so as to make himself big. That the new thought which he speakeed was not a first thing shall touch him first of all the people."

They led Don Sonjo, not speaking, to the ship. They made him climb the ladder. On the last rung he hung back. His head turned, looking over all their heads, at the hills, and the pastures, and the houses. At the things which they were taking from him with his life. Which they were sending him away from. Then he was gone in, and they closed the lock behind him, and came down.

"There is a long sender in the ship." The new face of Andas Godal was hewn from a hard rock. "One I dreamed especially for this rising. We shall learn from what he speaks what this rising means to the one in the ship."

But, when the thin shape slid up, faster than eyes could watch, Don Sonjo did not speak. There was one sound only. Then nothing. And the ship was gone.

"It can happen," Andas Godal said slowly, "that he died before the rising. Being feared."

"He was a man of fear," Jone Jonsey said.

"For the next," Hy Jonsey muttered, "it must be one who takes the touch himself to ride in the ship."

"Who," Son Sonjon wondered, "Who would want this?" He stared up at the sky that was empty. That had swallowed the ship, and showed nothing of the swallow. "Who?"

Andas Godal answered on the instant. "I speak for that now," he claimed. His face, also, was lifted to the sky. Eagerly. Unlike Son Sonjon's. Unlike Arna Halwell's face, which was on Dillon's. Where he stood, near the council and the chiefs from Jonville. Who had greeted him, after the Council had spoken them in private, if not with liking, yet, after their fashion, with respect. Arna Halwell, moving sweetly across the grass to her man, was content.

But it was Mas Halwell who said the last word. "It can happen," he told them, "that this ship which has risen may speak of us. Of where our world of Sumedin is to be found. For in the ship is writ the signs I took from Burke Halwell's journal. Of the way the First Settlers came along the stars. These figures being something which we do not get, but which to those who may find our ship among the stars, and enter it, will speak of a meeting to which they should come."

He closed his summing-up. "We have done what the First Council wanted we should do. We have built our road to the stars. A road, not only for us, but for others to come to us. We shall learn where, along that road, we meet again our own, old blood."

—Clifford C. Reed

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James White has produced a long series of notable ideas over the years—simple ideas in the main, but when allied to a good science fiction plot, somewhat sensational in outlook. Take his current story, for instance. Rubbish dumped in space becoming a menace to interplanetary shipping. And whoever thought of having gardens on spaceships? ON—not IN!

DEADLY LITTER

by JAMES WHITE

Illustrated by LEWIS

Chapter One

The man who opened the door did not waste his breath asking who they were or what they wanted, he merely stared at Captain Gregory and the two space officers behind him and waited. The frightened expression in his eyes—the only features capable of registering emotion in the stiff, shiny mask some plastic surgeon had given him—made it plain that he had been expecting this visit, that he had been expecting it and worrying about it for years.

“You are James Andrew Caulfield,” said Gregory quietly, “one-time Engineer on the passenger-carrying freighter *Sunflower*. May we come in?”

The man nodded and they all filed inside. Gregory sat facing Caulfield while his men, Hartman and Nolan, remained standing with their eyes fixed unblinkingly on the ex-Engineer. Behind those eyes were remembered pictures of contorted faces, frozen, brittle bodies and the riddled, battered and totally wrecked ships which were the end results of some

spaceman's dirty habits. The hatred which Lieutenants Nolan and Hartman felt towards Caulfield and the others like him was controlled—just barely controlled—but they made no effort to conceal it.

"You have the choice of imprisonment or of coming with us," said Gregory suddenly, and added; "Unless you can throw all the blame onto your late Captain—and you might have a job doing that after all this time—your sentence will be heavy. Alternatively you can come with me and revisit the scene of the crime."

"I'll come with you, of course," said Caulfield; then with a note of derision in his voice, "But don't you think the scene of the crime is just a little bit out of range by now . . .?"

Hartman leaned forward and cleared his throat threateningly but Gregory decided that the time for getting tough with this man was not yet. Ignoring the other's tone, he said, "I am aware that our Sun shares a general rotation around the galactic centre, that the Galaxy as a whole is in motion towards someplace else, and that the exact positions in space occupied by *Sunflower* eleven years ago are very far away by now. But for our purpose the Sun, together with its planets, moons, meteorites and the variegated junk which has been added by ourselves, can be considered a closed gravitational system.

"You're allowed seventy pounds of luggage. Start choosing what you want to take along."

Gregory was thinking that Caulfield sounded more like an astrogator than an engineer. And it was a great pity that the prisoner hadn't been *Sunflower's* pilot instead of just its reactor-man. But he was the only man now living of that ship's original crew, and Gregory had to use what material there was available, poor though it might be.

Watching Caulfield pack—he took technical books mainly, a large photograph of his late wife and various odds and ends—Gregory learned a great deal about the man. The apartment he occupied told him a lot, too, much more than the civil police who had tracked down Caulfield had been able to do. The information was going to be very useful when the time came to put the pressure on this particular ex-Engineer.

"This one gave in very easily, sir," Nolan observed while Hartman and Caulfield were settling up with the building's supervisor. "Usually they object more. Most prefer gaol."

"Maybe he loves space and misses being out," Gregory said a little absently. "You know how some of these ex-spacemen are. Maybe he wants to get out again under any circumstances."

Nolan grunted. He said, "If he loved space that much, why did he have to do such a thorough job of mucking it up?"

There was no simple answer to that.

On the way to the spacefield Gregory was silent, thinking mainly about the apartment they had just left. The contents of the bookcases had made it plain that Caulfield had tried to keep abreast of things, that he must have been passionately interested in spaceflight as a whole and not only in his own specialty. The overall *decor* had indicated a woman's influence, that of a neat, pleasant, feminine but no-nonsense type of woman. But dust had gathered in odd corners where no woman would allow dust to be, and there had been other pointers that the influence which had made the place what it was had departed. Gregory knew from the police that Caulfield's wife had died two years previously, yet there had been strong indications that he had not moved a thing since, although continuing to keep the place as clean as he knew how.

An intelligent, sensitive type obviously, with a lot of respect for his dead wife's memory. Gregory thought that he would try the sympathetic approach with Caulfield. For a while, anyway.

At the field's main gate and passenger terminal they had to stop while Gregory showed his credentials. One of the ever-present hawkers, catching sight of Caulfield's civvie dress, hurried up to try to sell him a packet of used tea-leaves which were purported to have made the trip from Ganymede. In an under-tone, but with a command of language which made even Hartman look interested, their prisoner told the man what he thought of his well-travelled tea-leaves. He was beginning to make equally pungent suggestions as to their disposal when the gate official waved the car through.

Out on the field they were twice held up by lights as passenger shuttles took off, but eventually they reached the ferry which would take them up to *Descartes*. And less than three hours after knocking on Caulfield's door they were in space.

The Police Survey Ship *Descartes* was a large vessel which could, if necessary, make a direct landing on a planet, and for this reason it possessed the large stabiliser fins and stream-

lining which normally was confined to small ferry rockets. Most of her interior was taken up by fuel tanks for the landing motors and practically all of what was left was filled by the reactor, electronic computers and a wide variety of measuring and direction-finding equipment, so that the living quarters were cramped and not very comfortable. But Gregory was intensely proud of his ship, so much so that it didn't bother him at all that everybody in space called it 'The Dust-cart' . . .

Lieutenant Allen was on orbit watch in the control-room when they transferred from the shuttle. He gave Caulfield a brief, unfriendly look, nodded to Hartman and Nolan, then launched into his report to the Captain. Nothing at all had happened—which was normal for a ship in the two thousand mile orbit—but several signals had come in. All were routine notices except for one reporting dirty habits on the part of an unidentified crew-man from *Cerberus*. One of the passengers had sent it up from the ground after landing . . .

"I distrust passengers' reports," Gregory broke in irritably. "Even when they're sincere and not just imagining things they frequently mistake what they think they see. We've found *Cerberus* to be a tidy ship . . ."

Part of his irritation was due to having to delay questioning Caulfield. The matter of the *Sunflower* Drift was most urgent, and Caulfield was obviously on tenterhooks waiting for the grilling to start. But maybe it would be a good thing to keep him stewing in his own juice a little longer.

"Very well, Mr. Allen, we'll check on it," Gregory said finally. "Off you go, and have a good leave."

"Thank you, sir," said Allen briskly, and left to board the ferry which had brought Gregory and the others up.

Hartman took the astrogation panel, Nolan the Engineer's position, and Gregory went to his post between and slightly behind them where he could watch everything. Caulfield had one of the two extra acceleration chairs near a direct vision port. Hartman fed the figures of their own orbit into the calculator together with those of *Cerberus* and quickly came up with the corrections necessary to make them intersect. He passed the figures to Nolan who looked enquiringly at the Captain. Gregory nodded to go ahead.

"Straps, everyone," said Nolan quietly. "Twelve and a half seconds at two-G."

The gyros whined briefly and died as they brought the ship into correct alignment. Chemical rockets flared, ramming

them deep into their chairs, and also died after what felt like much longer than twelve seconds. All that remained was to wait for *Cerberus* to come up to them and match velocities, which would happen in twenty-seven minutes.

Gregory spent the time watching their prisoner.

Despite the enormous and steady increase in space commerce which had taken place over the past quarter century there was still no shortage of parking space around Earth. It was very rare, however, for a ship taking up orbit not to be within visual distance of at least three others. Caulfield was dividing his attention between the fuzzy points of light which were orbiting ships and the silent occupants of the control-room. When he looked out the port he was relaxed and almost happy, but when he glanced inwards lines of tension formed around his mouth and eyes. As the minutes dragged by he was looking inwards more and more frequently.

Watching him, Gregory was not in the least surprised by the outburst when it came.

"What are you waiting for?" Caulfield shouted suddenly, "You want to ask questions, well *ask* them! Start with nice easy ones! What was *Sunflower's* exact position, course and velocity at 1603 hours August Twelve eleven years ago? Was I by any chance feeling hungry and did we make tea? What happened to the dishes? Am I *sure* that was what happened. .?"

Lieutenant Hartman cleared his throat again, but very properly did not look round from his panel, and Caulfield broke off awkwardly.

Gregory said evenly, "You've got the right general idea, Caulfield, but there have been improvements in technique since your time. We have drugs nowadays which give you total recall—"

"No," said Caulfield, looking frightened.

"The law does not allow me to administer these drugs against your will," Gregory went on, "but the penalties if you refuse to co-operate are likely to be more severe. The treatment has no permanent ill effects on the brain. . ."

"No!"

"Be realistic, man!" Gregory said sharply. "I already know that you married your late Captain's wife very soon after his death, and that could mean a lot of things. But I need certain data only. Anything else I find in passing, besides being of no interest or concern to me whatever, is privileged information."

Caulfield began protesting fiercely that there was nothing off-colour in his private life and went into a welter of explanations, during which Gregory found out a few things which he did not know already and which gave him a clearer picture of the other's personality and motivations.

When Caulfield had been in hospital after the accident on *Sunflower* the Captain's widow had visited him a lot, wanting to hear about her late husband. Apparently both of them were in need of sympathy and consolation, so they teamed up and made a go of it. But his new wife had lost one husband in space and she made Caulfield promise never to lift out again. He had not been completely happy on-planet, but for his wife's sake he had kept his promise. Until now, that was . . .

"Closing with *Cerberus*," announced Nolan at that point. "Ten seconds acceleration warning. Straps."

Suddenly thrust made conversation not worth the effort. When it had gone, *Cerberus* hung framed in the viewport less than a quarter of a mile away. Gregory saw Caulfield's jaw drop open.

Lit harshly both by the Sun and reflected light from the cloud layer below, the big colonial supply vessel looked as if it badly needed a pruning. From all three spheres of the enormous triple dumb-bell and their connecting structure there sprouted gaudy profusion of flowers, grass and climbing plants. What looked like dark green ivy softened or concealed the outlines of the radar and periscope extensions, colourful flower beds broke up the clear areas of the hulls—cunningly arranged so that at certain angles the viewports gave the appearance of being small lily ponds—and where the dictates of efficiency made it necessary for bare metal to be present, this was so skilfully painted up that it went almost unnoticed. In Gregory's opinion the garden of *Cerberus* was stylised and showed little imagination, but like her skipper whose personality it to a certain extent reflected, it was solid, conservative and law-abiding.

"This is another recent development," Gregory said to Caulfield. "Probably you've seen pictures of these space-going back gardens, but I expect the sight of the real thing comes as a bit of a shock." He turned to Hartman and said, "Radio them we're coming aboard, then stand watch until we get back. Nolan, you suit up and come with me. You, too, Caulfield."

Chapter Two

Their prisoner was a little awkward on the way over, but Gregory wasn't worrying about that—a spaceman never quite forgot how to handle himself in weightless conditions. It was like learning to swim or ride a bicycle in that respect. When they arrived on *Cerberus*' hull Nolan and Gregory went for a walk in the garden rather than entering the ship immediately, with Caulfield tagging along.

Gregory paused in his inspection of the artificial growths to ask, "D'you know why ships have gardens, Caulfield?"

"I think so," the ex-Engineer replied, his voice flat and distorted through the phones. "Claustrophobia among the passengers and crew was a problem even in my day, especially in ships on the longer runs. Ships tend to be cramped, which begets claustrophobia and allied neuroses. These can get out of control and wreck a ship as surely as a reactor blow-up. Yet theoretically there is enough empty space outside to cure any claustrophobe, or even knock him over the hump into agoraphobia, if it could be used right.

"What they did was to steer a path between the two phobias," Caulfield went on, "by rigging the outer hull of a ship to look like a garden. Besides giving the crew something to do on a long trip, this meant that a man who was beginning to feel the bulkheads closing in on him could go out and sit or walk on the hull and fool himself into thinking that he was in an Earthly garden at night with the stars shining brightly. There were anomalies, of course, but it was all very reassuring to the subconscious mind. It is easy to fool a mind that wants to be fooled, especially one's own, and the garden therapy worked in most cases."

"That's right," said Gregory, trying to hide his surprise. There had been a strange air of *authority* in Caulfield's tone in spite of the distortion. This was certainly an unusual Engineer.

Gregory and Nolan continued to examine random sections of the ship's hull. Close inspection revealed the grass-like areas to be the product of skilful painting on a roughened plastic surface thin enough for their boot magnets to hold the metal plating underneath. The flowers were also plastic as were the bushes and creepers which broke up the 'lawn' at intervals of ten or twenty yards—due to a careless job of painting one of the bigger leaves still had the name of a food company on its

underside. But each and every item of this luxuriant but artificial greenery was solidly anchored down—in the case of the longer stems or branches they were held in several places to the numerous metal projections from the ship's hull. Gregory gave several of them a sharp tug to make sure of this.

"As well as the psychological angle," he explained to Caulfield, "this stuff makes an effective meteor shield. And as it is composed of the organic and inorganic waste products from the ship, surplus rubbish can be carried in this way. But there are strict regulations governing the construction of these gardens, designed to make sure that a glancing collision with a meteorite will not carry away a large section of it and further increase the hazard to—"

"I know about the regulations," said Caulfield shortly.

"I suppose you do, considering how many of them you must have broken," Gregory said drily. He straightened up, looked across at the smoothly rounded hillock that was the cargo sphere set between the tall clumps of bushes which were the control globe's radar extensions, sighed and added, "Let's go inside."

Captain Stillson, a large, worried-looking man whose knees did not suit the shorts customarily worn by officers in space, met them at the lock. The Captain of *Cerberus* was a bit of an old woman, but Gregory felt more than usually well-disposed towards him for the simple reason that he was both strict and extremely tidy, and if more Captains were like him Gregory would have a lot fewer headaches.

"Well, Captain," Gregory said smiling, "how does your garden grow?"

"Slowly, I'm glad to say," Stillson replied in his prim, colourless voice. "Especially since we installed that new waste converter and storage bins. I expect you want to see them?"

"Later," said Gregory. "First I have to investigate a dirty habits charge . . ."

The friendly atmosphere inside the lock chamber congealed suddenly, as if space had been let in. After a shocked moment of silence Stillson reacted. He demanded to know the details, particularly who the lying so-and-so was who had made the charge. His tone had become anything but prim.

Gregory supplied details and presently two of *Cerberus'* officers arrived. They were the Communications and Engineer

Officers, and they looked wary but not guilty to Gregory's experienced eye. Still, he could be wrong.

"The charge has been made," said Gregory sternly, "that while you were on the outer hull two days ago, one of you threw away or otherwise discarded into space a body or bodies of small mass and at present unknown composition. What have you to say?"

The two officers had plenty to say, and early in the proceedings Gregory decided quite definitely that they were not guilty as charged, but he kept on with the grilling for a solid half hour despite this. He made them go through their stories forwards, backwards and sideways—and from the middle out to both ends at once. He did it partly as a demonstration of technique for Nolan's benefit and partly to bring home the fact to the watching Caulfield that, when it came to his turn, it would be futile to lie. It would also clear the possible misconception which Caulfield might hold that the anti-rubbish laws were as lax now as they had been in the old days.

So Gregory made the Engineer and Radio Officers sweat, and only with an appearance of reluctance did he allow them to convince him that they had been engaged in straightening a warped retractable loading boom, that it had been necessary to align it against the hundred yards distant antenna projecting from the control globe, and that the directions for aligning it had been given by the radioman to the engineer via hand signals because the suit radio circuit was tied up with the transfer of passengers to the ferry. It had been a tricky job and sometimes the engineer had over-corrected, so that the radio officer's signals had been a bit violent at times. From certain angles they *could* have looked as though he was throwing something away into space . . .

Finally Gregory let them go, then went to inspect the new waste converter and storage bins. While this was in progress he found himself thinking several times that a policeman these days, as well as being a psychologist, astronomer, cybernetics engineer, et al, would find a grounding in good old-fashioned sanitary engineering useful also.

Back on *Descartes* Captain Gregory decided that he owed himself some sleep. He gave Hartman the course, showed Caulfield his cabin and just managed to reach his bunk before the half-G from the reactor began easing the ship out of orbit.

Once settled, however, Gregory found that his mind would not believe his body when the latter told the former it was tired.

He kept thinking about ex-Engineer Caulfield, lying within two feet of him and separated only by a quarter inch of plating. An officer guilty of dirty habits, or whose crew-mates had been guilty of dirty habits, or whose late Captain had been so guilty—it didn't really make much difference where Gregory was concerned. The crime committed aboard *Sunflower* eleven years ago had cost one ship and eighteen lives to date and the total would pile up for years to come, perhaps for hundreds of years to come. The size of that future-stretching casualty list depended on three things: how much Caulfield knew, how fully he could be made to remember it, and how effectively Captain Gregory could put the information gained to use.

It was a heavy responsibility and weighty enough to make sleep difficult for any man. And just as an added edge to his unease was the knowledge that if he slipped up on any one of those three items he would probably lose his life.

One hundred and fifty years ago in the early nineteen fifties the problem had not existed. Except for the naturally occurring phenomena such as micro-meteorite dust, periodic meteor showers and the extremely rare pebbles of over an ounce or so in weight, space had been a clean, empty and fairly safe place. But then the first artificial satellites had gone up, followed by manned temporary and permanent satellites and eventually by the giant multi-stage vehicles which took men to the Moon and nearer planets. All rockets were chemically powered in those days, of course, so that weight-saving became almost a mania with their Captains and crews.

Nothing was carried an instant longer than was necessary. Reserve fuel tanks, food containers, scraps and all the organic and inorganic waste products of the ship which could not be re-used were discarded so as to lighten ship, and by so doing save reaction mass for emergencies. An extra half-ton of fuel in reserve—especially when landing in bad weather—could make all the difference between a ship dropping gently onto its landing apron and one that dug a deep grave for its crew somewhere in the desert.

So *everything* was dumped; promptly, automatically, unthinkingly . . .

But this mania for saving weight persisted long after the necessity for it had gone. The arrival of atomic powered ships

which did not have to land, served by ferry-rockets to transfer cargo and passengers between the ground and orbit, made the saving of weight a matter of economics rather than one of life and death, and even this item became less important as better fuels and reactors were developed. But still the habit continued. During the eighty-odd years following the first manned trip to Mars, when space commerce proved itself to be a paying proposition between the rapidly expanding colonies on Mars and Venus and the cold-research establishments on the moons of Jupiter and Saturn, and when the number of space vehicles in commission had passed the thousand mark, all those crews on all those ships making all those round trips had unknowingly been committing what was now the dirtiest crime in the book !

Gregory squirmed in his bunk, which under the ship's present half-G thrust was as soft as a cloud, and swore helplessly. If someone could only have told them.

Consider the contents, detailed composition and method of disposal of a simple everyday bucket of trash. And expecially what happened to it after its disposal . . .

There would be food scraps, potato peelings and a number of food containers of the plastic, disposal kind designed for use in weightless conditions—both empty and partially so. Also unused, wrapped sugar lumps and a fair quantity of wet tea-leaves. The steward or crew-man assigned to the galley would put on a suit, take his load into the airlock and wait a few minutes. The delay was to allow the moisture content of the trash to boil off into space so that when he got rid of it the stuff would be dry and would leave the bucket clean. Washing anything in weightless conditions was a horribly complicated business besides being wasteful of water, so that practically everything was dry-cleaned in this way. Its disposal would then be accomplished by giving it a short, sharp swing and jerking it empty. There would be considerable muscle-power exerted during the throwaway because in free flight objects tended to be attracted back to the parent ship if not expelled with sufficient force, and passengers complained and the Captain had harsh things to say to the culprit.

The individual particles of the material spread, having been given motions tangential to the arc of the steward's swing. Within seconds the material was spread out over fifty yards, in a matter of hours it might occupy several cubic miles of space,

and years later it was still spreading. Possessing as it did the velocity of the ship at the time of being ejected, it was moving many times faster than the natural meteor swarms which fell around the Sun. Its velocity might be great enough to take it well beyond the orbits of the major planets before the tremendous gravity pull of the primary first braked it to a halt and then began accelerating it Sunwards again. By this time it would have expanded and joined with other ejections which had occurred from the same ship hours or maybe days earlier while the vessel had held the same course and velocity, and a too-close contact with the gravity-field of a planet might have set it spinning about itself, or condensed it or pulled it farther apart.

And decades later it would arrive where the traffic was heaviest, within the orbits of the inner planets, a deadly, superfast and ultra-destructive meteor shower extending across hundreds or thousands of miles of space.

Space was vast and the particles of such a swarm were so widely separated that a ship might run through it without damage. But there had been an awful lot of rubbish dumped into space in one hundred and fifty years and a ship might not always be lucky.

There had been a time when people thought it funny that a ship could be wrecked by a few tea leaves or a frigid, iron-hard potato peeling. But among spacemen, Gregory thought sourly, it was the sort of joke at which you died laughing.

Suddenly he gave a prodigious, eye-watering yawn and went to sleep.

Chapter Three

Six hours later he woke, dressed and went into the control-room to relieve Hartman. Nolan had another four hours to do and was at the communications panel keeping a radio watch, and in his usual efficient fashion doing two things at once. How Lieutenant Nolan could listen to the mush in his headphones while both hands were searching up and down the shipping frequencies, and at the same time catch up on his technical reading from a book propped between his knees, was something that Captain Gregory could never understand. He told Hartman that he wanted to see Caulfield at once, and to rout him out of his bunk. Also would the Lieutenant then be good enough to make them all something to eat, after which he could hit the sack himself.

Briskly and unobtrusively in the way expected of junior lieutenants, Hartman went to do as he was told.

When Caulfield arrived, looking sleepy and anxious and generally as if his resistance was low, Lieutenant Nolan glanced up. For a few seconds Gregory watched him fight a mental battle as he tried to decide whether the book or listening to the questioning would be more educational. Suddenly he closed the book, moved one ear-phone away from an ear and prepared to listen in two directions at once.

Gregory switched on the recorder, then said briskly, "Hope you slept well. Sit over there, please. Now tell me about the accident—not the version you gave eleven years ago, but the truth.

"And don't waste my time and patience by lying," he added, "because I know just enough to catch you out."

The ex-Engineer looked confused for a moment, then he stammered, "I . . . it was a meteor that did it, a big one, but moving relatively slowly with respect to us—it didn't vaporise on contact. It side-swiped the control globe, mashed up most of the radio gear, then went through the reactor shielding and out. After the damaged areas were sealed-off and the passengers quietened down—"

"When was this? When *exactly*?"

Caulfield rubbed his eyes. He said, "We left orbit around Earth on June Eighth at 1200, built up our mps until the same time July Fifteenth when the reactor was shut down. We were supposed to coast free for twenty-five days before deceleration began for orbit around Ganymede. It was early on the seventh day of free flight that the meteor hit. Or maybe it was the ninth . . ."

"You'll have to be more accurate than that," said Gregory drily. "But we'll come back to the timing later, go on with what happened after the accident."

A lot had happened after the collision, Caulfield told him. Reactors were heavy items of equipment which could not be lifted into orbit in toto, so that the shielding resembled a three-dimensional, interlocking jigsaw composed of shaped lead bricks. The meteor had carried away part of *Sunflower's* reactor shielding and knocked the rest of it loose so that it leaked radiation like a sieve. They had to jury-rig remote control manipulators to try to rebuild the shielding, but with their limited resources the job wasn't completely successful—the reactor worked, but it still leaked slightly and would not deliver full thrust.

They had been in free flight for nineteen days by the time the reactor was patched up, and it was then that they realised that they would overshoot Ganymede, that even if the reserves of chemical fuel were used in conjunction with the faulty power pile their velocity could not be checked.

There only chance, and a very slim one, had been to lighten ship.

"And you did so, obviously," Gregory cut in, "because you succeeded in reaching Ganymede. But what exactly did you chuck out, and when? And what did the passengers and crew think of all this?"

The passengers knew nothing and the crew had kept quiet so as to protect their Captain, Caulfield replied. The anti-dumping laws were tightening up in those days and the penalties were heavy, but at that time there were a lot of space personnel who did not consider dumping to be a crime—at least, not a very serious one. Besides, the Captain's main concern had been for the safety of his passengers.

"A nice, noble-sounding secondary reason," Lieutenant Nolan interrupted, "for wanting to save his own neck."

For a moment it looked as if Caulfield was going to take a swing at the Lieutenant, but then he relaxed into an angry silence. Watching the ex-Engineer, Gregory thought that his reactions were a little too strong, that he had behaved as if he was being personally insulted. Caulfield must have been very close to his late skipper to react in that way.

"Be quiet, Nolan," Gregory said mildly, then to Caulfield, "Go on."

"We emptied the rubbish storage bins first," Caulfield continued in a soft furious voice, "and then got rid of the less important personal possessions. We thought of dumping the cargo but that was something which could not be hidden either from the passengers or the port authorities on Ganymede, and anyway it was mainly lightweight precision instruments for the research labs there and suspended on rope slings—its mass was negligible. Finally we used up the reserve chemical fuel and this both slowed us down a lot and lightened the ship by several tons.

"The collision earlier must have damaged one of the valves in a fuel line, because there was an explosion in the line just as the last of the fuel was being burned. That was when I copped it.

"The explosion jerked loose some of the bricks around the pile," Caulfield went on more quietly. "The . . . the Captain was in the reactor room alone at the time. Apparently he considered the situation serious enough for him to start rebuilding the shielding right away. By hand."

Caulfield paused in an unconscious, three-seconds silence for the dead, then went on, "By the time he'd finished he was so hot that nobody could go near him. He had taken much more than a lethal dose of radiation and could only have lived a matter of hours. He radioed us that it was his duty to lighten ship, swore a bit, then jumped off . . ."

Gregory was silent for several minutes after Caulfield had finished, thinking vaguely philosophical thoughts. The fast-thinking, brave, practical and guilty Captain Warren of *Sunflower* had been in a tight spot eleven years ago with a hard decision to make—in danger of falling past or into Jupiter and no radio call for help, even if it was available. It was possible that those circumstances would have been considered by the courts sufficiently extenuating to excuse him lightening ship and he might simply have lost his ticket. If he had been honest about the whole thing, that was, and kept a full and accurate log as to the mass and other relevant data of the material which had been dumped. As it was, if Captain Warren had lived and the truth had come out they would have crucified him, so maybe it was a good thing he had died then.

But this kind of thinking was getting him nowhere, Gregory told himself irritably; he had better stick to business.

He said, "I suppose you don't know the direction he jumped in . . .?"

"They tried to keep me informed of things after the explosion," Caulfield said coldly, "but I was full of dope because of my burns. If they told me I don't remember."

The ex-Engineer was looking at him in a way which said plainly that anyone capable of asking the foregoing question was a callous, inhuman unprintable. *Probably*, thought the Captain, *he's right*.

Lieutenant Hartman arrived at that point with coffee and sandwiches. The coffee was in squirters because even under half-G thrust drinking from a cup was a tricky business. Hartman distributed the food, excused himself and left for his bunk.

"A while back you stated that the meteor hit you on either the seventh or ninth day of free flight," Gregory said suddenly, speaking around his sandwich. "I'm going to have to pin it down more accurately than that. To do so I'll have to run you back repeatedly over that whole period, isolating each day by identifying incidents. It will be dull, repetitious, mentally fatiguing work. You'd better drink all that coffee."

"Now to start with," he continued, chasing the remains of the sandwich with near-scalding fluid, "what do you remember of the first day of the free flight period . . .?"

Three hours later Caulfield's eyes were bloodshot and he looked infinitely more wretched than when Hartman had dragged him out of bed, and Gregory felt like the prisoner looked. He decided to let up on the questioning for a while, having learned the day and to within an hour or so the time of *Sunflower's* collision with the meteor. He had also found out the approximate mass of the material jettisoned, though not the times at which it had been dumped. And surprisingly, he had obtained remarkably accurate data on *Sunflower's* course and velocity, all of which made him feel almost well-disposed towards the prisoner.

"You surprise me, Caulfield," Gregory said smiling. "Some of this stuff . . . well, I could almost think you were the astrogation officer instead of an engineer."

"I was the nose type," Caulfield said, looking down at his hands, "and interested in everybody's job."

"Bully for you," said Gregory, "and as things turned out, lucky for us. Now if you'd like to rest for a while—"

He broke off as Nolan stiffened suddenly in his seat and covered both his ears with the phones. The Lieutenant fine tuned, listened briefly, then reported, "*Viper* calling, sir. Will I switch in the speaker or . . ." He looked meaningly at the prisoner. ". . . will you use phones?"

"Speaker." He took the mike Nolan handed him and said, "Gregory, *Descartes*, here. What's the trouble, Commander?"

The voice of Commander Keatly, the Captain and sole crew of the police patrol ship *Viper*, was a dry, emotionless rustle almost indistinguishable from the crackle of background static. Keatly was a disquieting person close up, but any man who could stand both space and his own company for months on end without one or the other driving him insane just had to be a little bit off to begin with. Gregory therefore ignored the

seeming lack of formal respect in the other's words—and would have done so even if he had not known that the Commander was at present engaged in both running before and trying to keep pace with a meteor swarm whose size, composition and velocity were only roughly known—as Keatly said, “I have avoided trouble so far, but I need more data if I am to continue doing so. Do you have it?”

“A little,” Gregory replied, and began digesting the information he had just acquired from Caulfield. In conclusion he added, “Run this stuff through your computer, we’ll do the same and have a discussion on it when we rendezvous. That should be in ten days. Meanwhile stay as close to that swarm as seems compatible with minimum safety requirements, and report every twelve hours.”

“Right,” said Keatly.

“Very well. Message ends and signing off.”

“Right. Me, too.”

Shortly afterwards Caulfield left for his cabin, followed half an hour later by Nolan whose watch had ended. Captain Gregory found himself alone in his control room with nothing to occupy him but the radio watch and his thoughts. There were other jobs which he would have liked to do—breaking down Caulfield's figures and seeing what the ship's computers made of them, for instance. But people in space were always getting into trouble, so regulations stated that everybody must listen to their cries for help. There was no way at all of enforcing this regulation, of course, but most spacemen held the strong feeling that if they were to avoid this boring job even for a few minutes, then when they themselves got into trouble there would be nobody listening for them.

It was a case of the precept ‘Do unto others’ transplanted to space.

The processing of the figures could wait a few hours until Hartman came back on duty, Gregory told himself. At the same time they gave him a fairly clear picture of the birth, growth and movements of the *Sunflower* Drift which he could think about while listening.

This man-made meteor swarm which they had been ordered to investigate must now be assumed to comprise two separate drifts sharing roughly the same course but possessing different velocities, the reason for this being that material had been dumped both before and after a period of sharp deceleration

by *Sunflower's* chemical engines. Fortunately the velocities were known fairly accurately although the exact times and masses of material jettisoned were not. This was information, however, which could and would be wrung out of Caulfield in the near future.

As Gregory saw it, the first series of dumpings while the ship was in free fall had produced a long, gradually expanding cylinder of debris which was more *fast*. After the period of deceleration a second and similar collection of material had been ejected, but this time moving more slowly. The first and faster component had overtaken, inter-penetrated and passed the second. Then during the close passage with Jupiter which followed, both of these diffuse, non-homogenous cylinders of debris would have been pulled out of true—bent, twisted and probably set slowly spinning. They would have proceeded outwards towards their aphelion, the faster of the two going the farthest. Approximately five years later the tremendous gravity-pull of the Sun would have checked even their enormous velocity and begun to slowly drag them back.

So they returned, accelerating rapidly as they neared the Sun. On the way they encountered the passenger ship *Santa Isobella* and left it a total wreck in which only one man was left alive, and then only long enough to radio the time and position of the disaster. The *Leningrad*, a larger ship which fortunately was travelling in the same direction as the swarm, received a glancing hit which left a dent in her hull and a smear of fused plastic in its wake. The smear was scraped off, and analysed and it eventually lead to the identification of the ship which had produced it.

The two components of the swarm swung fast and close around the Sun and headed out again, still widely seperated but closing steadily with each other. And three weeks hence, at approximately the distance from the Sun of their first inter-penetration they would do so again. The cylinders by this time might be a thousand or more miles in diameter—if they were still cylinders and if they had not begun to spin. Spinning, which would periodically present their long axis to their direction of motion, would make them an even worse menace to navigation.

Definitely, thought Gregory, *this is going to be a tricky one.*

His job was to investigate this newly-discovered swarm so thoroughly that its position at any time during the next half

century would be known—that was how far ahead such things were listed in the Ephemeris. He knew that the computers on *Descartes* and *Vixen* were equal to tasks much more tricky than this, provided they were given accurate data to work with. Without that data . . .

Gregory resolved to tackle Caulfield again about the total recall drugs during the next session. In the meantime he tried to emulate Lieutenant Nolan by doing some preliminary calculations on the scratchpad with one hand while searching the radio frequencies with the other. Unsuccessfully.

Chapter Four

On the fifth day out from Earth, *Viper* reported that the leading section of the drift was now a fuzzy patch on his rear radar screen. In Keatly's estimation he had matched course and velocity with it exactly. Not very respectfully he requested permission to drop back for a closer look.

"No!" said Gregory firmly. "Stay out until we know more about it, that's an order!" He signed off, then returned to his interrupted questioning of Caulfield.

He said, "You tell me that it wasn't until early on the tenth day after collision that the decision was finally taken to lighten ship. You had been working for sixteen hours on the damaged pile trying to make it develop full thrust, but without success. Then the crew were told to dump the waste. We've already arrived at the cubic capacity of your trash containers, but now I must know at what intervals they were emptied from the airlock. Think hard."

"A-about 0700 or 0800," said Caulfield tiredly.

"I want it closer than that," said Gregory sternly. "Are you sure you didn't hear the lock being opened and closed? Or see crew-men go past with the waste? Where were you at this time?"

"All over. With the passengers, at the reactor, in the control-room . . ."

"In the control-room?"

"Yes, when the . . . the Captain was looking at the pile. He had an atomics degree, too, you see."

"I see," Gregory said, and pressed; "But you must remember *something*. The locks aren't completely silent."

"Yes, I do," said Caulfield suddenly. "When I was in Control the airlock indicators flashed a couple of times. But I don't know the exact minute—this was eleven years ago, dammit!"

"There is always a chronometer above the main control panel. You saw the times at which the indicators flashed by peripheral vision even if you didn't look at the clock directly, and the incident is recorded in your brain. I want that memory.

"No," Gregory continued in his quiet, inexorable voice, "we'll start again from the time you finished working on the reactor . . ."

Two long, slogging, dry-mouthed hours later Caulfield said suddenly:

"I remember a sort of jerk now as well as the indicator lights. Yes! And they pulled an acceleration chair apart for the springs. It was the Steward's idea—a flat sheet of plastic with springs at the corners. They made a sort of spring-loaded catapult in the airlock, filled the lock completely with rubbish, then released the springs.

"It was much faster than emptying can-fulls at a time. They must have got rid of all the loose trash in a couple hours!"

Gregory compressed his lips and made rapid notes on the scratchpad. The cubic capacity of *Sunflower's* airlock was on record, as also were the specifications of the springs used in acceleration chairs of that period. This was the sort of data which computers could get their teeth into. And most important of all, if the waste had been got rid of as quickly as Caulfield said then the dimensions of the first component of the drift might be smaller than first imagined. Much smaller. Gregory began to feel a definite thrill of excitement which was, he had to admit, not unmixed with relief.

He said, "On the nineteenth day of free flight and the tenth after the collision you decided to shed weight. A day or so later occurred the explosion of the chemical motor feed-pipe in which you were burned and the Captain was exposed to a lethal dose of radiation. You also said that dumping was carried out after the explosion. What did this consist of?"

"The useless radio gear, I think, and what little waste there was produced at that time," Caulfield replied in a thick, weary voice. "I don't know exactly. I was burned, I told you, and full of dope."

For several seconds Gregory was silent, then he said, "You could be made to remember even that, after a fashion. But not right now. You can go, Caulfield. Sleep tight."

When the prisoner had gone Captain Gregory closed his eyes leaned back and simply enjoyed the sensation of not having to talk. He thought that Caulfield was a bit of an odd fish. That business of the TR drugs, for instance. The ex-Engineer shut up tight and dug his heels in with panic whenever Gregory mentioned total recall. It didn't seem characteristic, somehow.

Perhaps Gregory himself was being rather squeamish, but he did not like to force prisoners to take the total recall treatment or to stress its harmlessness too much. He happened to know that three out of every twenty people who underwent the treatment became hopelessly insane, though the indications were that in those cases there were certain mental weaknesses to begin with. Gregory felt easier, however, when a prisoner volunteered for the treatment rather than being blackmailed into it.

Caulfield was a surprisingly knowledgeable person, however, and must know the odds against emerging from the treatment insane. But Gregory was convinced that the risk involved was not what stopped the ex-Engineer from undergoing TR—it was something else entirely, something in his past life.

Gregory snorted in sheer impatience. In the past he had heard subjects relate incidents which would have made his rather sparse hair curl, if he had been the type to gain vicarious excitement from someone else's moral shortcomings. He wasn't and didn't, yet he could not make Caulfield understand that. And until the prisoner could be made to undergo TR—so that Gregory could obtain *all* the data available as well as checking the accuracy of that already received—they were all headed for an extremely dangerous situation wearing earmuffs and partial blindfolds.

It was time, he decided suddenly, to drop a few shots around the target instead of constantly pounding the bull's-eye. And so it was that all next day, while the police survey ship *Descartes* drove at one-half G along a course plotted to intersect that of a smaller police ship and a certain uncharted meteor swarm. He didn't ask the prisoner a single question. But on the following day he invited himself into the six by six box which was Caulfield's cabin.

"You lie where you are, I'll sit here," Gregory said pleasantly as he entered and pulled the folding seat down from the wall. "I'm here to discuss private matters with you. I thought you might prefer to talk to me alone."

Caulfield looked suddenly wary, but didn't speak.

"As I said before, I'm not interested in your private life as such," Gregory went on smoothly, "but such a talk has considerable therapeutic value—you know, relaxing your mind with normal, pleasant, everyday things as opposed to the grilling I usually give you."

"Would you like to talk about your student days, or your first ship? Or your wife, maybe . . .?" Gregory nodded towards the photograph on the wall beside him. "Or if you absolutely have to, the accident on *Sunflower*?"

"I've already told you all you need to know about my wife," Caulfield said harshly. "She came to the hospital to talk about the Captain. She was sorry for me because I was badly burned, I pitied her because of her loss. That started it. A few months later we married and lived happy ever after until two years ago when she died."

"Are you sure," said Gregory gently. "You know, we did some checking on the James Andrew Caulfield of before the accident, and he did not seem to be the type to settle down like that. A bit of a hell-raiser, he seems to have been. Of course, maybe your wife was a special type of person—"

"She was a very special person," Caulfield interrupted sharply, "and I don't want to discuss her with you. Neither will I submit to Total Recall . . ."

Angrily, reluctantly, Captain Gregory went back to pounding the bull's-eye.

Four days later the long-range radar showed a solid blob of light which was *Viper* and, approximately two thousand miles astern of her according to the scale, a formless, sparkling cloud that was the leading face of the meteor swarm. In *Descartes'* control-room the atmosphere, so far as Hartman and Nolan were concerned, was one of visual daggers and ice chips. Caulfield sat pretending that the hostility of the two officers meant nothing to him, and Captain Gregory—who had strong feelings of personal inadequacy over his failure to talk the prisoner into taking the TR treatment—stared silently through the viewport where, two hours later, Keatly's ship appeared and closed to within jumping distance.

Unlike *Descartes*, *Vixen* was never meant to land on a planet. It possessed, therefore, a garden. But the place where Commander Keatly went to escape temporarily from the incredibly cramped interior of his ship was not as other space gardens. There were no flowers or bushes or simulated grassy hillocks, no resemblance to Earthly surrounding at all, in fact. Instead there sprouted from *Vixen's* dumbell hull a mass of *shapes*—weird, twisted, undefined shapes so softly yet coldly painted that they merged perfectly into the infinite backdrop of space beyond them. Yet Keatly's garden was a beautiful place, a harsh, cold, unutterably lonely and beautiful place. It made Gregory think of stars shining above a wind-stripped, polar mountain range, and planets glaring like lidless eyes from the frigid blackness all around.

It was a beautiful and frightening place, Keatly's garden, and a perfect illustration of how well the Commander was adjusted to space. But a very small dose of it was enough for most people.

Gregory was still staring when *Vixen's* captain came through the airlock and shortly afterwards joined them in the control-room. They got down quickly to the job of sectioning up the swarm to be charted, and *Descartes'* computer worked overtime. Gregory was so engrossed that for nearly an hour he completely forgot Caulfield's existence, as opposed to pointedly ignoring him as the other officers were doing. Then a sudden question by Keatly just as the Commander was about to return to his ship brought the ex-Engineer into existence again.

"The data supplied by the prisoner is both inadequate and in some respects extremely inexact," Commander Keatly said to Gregory. "Is there not a possibility that he produced it to avoid the fatigue of further questioning rather than it being a product of memory? That he made most of it up, in other words?"

Caulfield's face was its usual stiff, expressionless mask, but his eyes showed anger as he said, "I know better than to try that." He rose suddenly and without receiving instructions or asking permission left for his cabin. Gregory let him go.

Fifteen minutes later the real job began.

Gregory spun ship and applied an exactly pre-calculated amount of thrust to allow the swarm to overtake them. Keatly in *Vixen* followed suit but veered towards the probable fringes

of the cloud rather than heading for its centre as was the larger ship. On the forward radar screen the drift expanded like a horde of frightened fire-flies, opening up slowly until it became a formless, unimpressive collection of blobs which were too widely distributed to give the appearance of being a threat. But that was because *Descartes* was running into the swarm at a relative snail's pace, a velocity measured in hundreds of miles per hour instead of the thousands of miles per second at which a normal commercial vessel might encounter it. The fuzzy points of light crawled off the edges of the forward scanner and spilled onto the lateral radar screens, and a truer indication of their deadliness was given by the rapidly mounting figures on the counter which gave the number of particles per hundred cubic miles of space.

To the unaided eye there was nothing at all to be seen, apart from the awful splendour which was always out there.

On the high speed sweep reducer screen the swarm was given shape and form, however. It appeared as a diffuse, irregular cloud whose edges almost touched the centre spot of the screen which represented *Descartes'* position. A short, tenuous filament of material was projecting to one side of the main body. Gregory directed *Vixen* towards it, then returned his attention to the reducer.

To his right Hartman bent forward in his straps with one finger on the emergency thrust button. On the other side Nolan's eyes were flickering back and forwards between the screen and the recording equipment, and Gregory wondered suddenly if he would go cross-eyed trying to watch both at once. The thought almost made him laugh, but he checked himself in time. Both officers looked like he felt at the moment. Tense.

He would have felt much easier if Caulfield's data could have been checked, preferably by a couple of sessions in total recall. The ex-Engineer was hiding something, obviously, and undergoing the TR treatment would have made it impossible for anything in his mind to remain hidden—those drugs were mainly pentothal derivatives. By refusing to undergo total recall, Caulfield had placed him in the position of planning and carrying out this whole survey operation on the basis of the prisoner's unsupported word.

True, Caulfield seemed to be trying his best to be helpful, and the data he had supplied was beautifully complete and accurate

so far as it went. But just suppose the figures had been doctored to hide something, something which might have happened on *Sunflower*? Caulfield, the engineer who admitted freely that he had been a jack-of-all-trades on his ship, knew enough to be able to do that. But what could possibly have happened on *Sunflower* that would land Caulfield in more trouble than he was in already?

Chapter Five

In the reducer screen the leading edges of the swarm crept like a filament of mist over the centre spot. The figures of Nolan and Hartman were statues whose only movement was the constant, jerky movements of their eyes.

But it was much more likely, Gregory told himself angrily, that Caulfield's secret had something to do with his private life after the accident. His behaviour then—voluntarily grounding himself to please his new wife—was at variance with the character Gregory had built in his mind from the records. Unless Caulfield had had a tremendous change of heart . . .

There was a sharp, metallic tap, loud only because it was being so strenuously listened for. Gregory jerked involuntarily, then relaxed. Hartman and Nolan blew clearly audible sighs of relief. Caulfield's figures, for this component of the swarm anyway, had been accurate.

The particle which had just struck *Descartes*—a frigid, dehydrated, steel-hard breadcrust or potato peeling or some such—had been travelling at a velocity of perhaps half that of a rifle bullet. That meant that they were moving through the swarm at a speed slow enough to be safe, yet fast enough for the job of charting to be carried out in a matter of days. All that remained for them to do was to make a series of dog-leg jumps through the drift and let the super-sensitive radar and other recording devices bring in the information that would make it possible for the computers to form a picture of its size, composition, development and future movements for the next half-century to come.

For a while Gregory forgot his suspicions regarding Caulfield's data. But at the end of the first day inside the swarm he found them returning. By the third day he was frankly worried, and decided to call *Vixen*. Keatly had a mind every bit as sharp and quick as any one of his ship's computers,

with an added spark of intuitive genius which no electronic calculator could match, and while Gregory might be the other's superior officer he was not a proud man.

"I have been puzzled by the size and extent of this part of the swarm also," Commander Keatly replied when Gregory had unburdened himself, "but didn't like to mention it. Definitely this component of the swarm is much too large."

"Any idea why?" asked Gregory.

Keatly was silent for a moment, then said, "The *Sunflower Drift* has two components, a fast one whose material was dumped before Caulfield's accident and whose composition he says he remembers fairly well, and a slow one released while he was under sedation for his burns. This one he doesn't remember so well, but says that it was the smaller of the two and contained only a little trash and a few pieces of broken radio gear and other light, removable fittings.

"As laid down by yourself," the Commander went on, "our course was to chart this slower and a smaller component first—which we have just finished doing—and then accelerate ahead so that when the faster component arrives and overtakes us the difference in relative velocities will be small enough not to damage our ships."

"Correct," said Gregory patiently. He knew Keatly would get to the point, sometime.

"My thought is this," Keatly said seriously, "that Caulfield could not have been so doped as to make this big an error in the quantity of material in the second component. It follows therefore that what we have just finished charting is not the slow and smaller component but the large, fast one."

"I've been thinking the same," Gregory said worriedly, "but was hoping you'd disagree with me."

Keatly did not have to belabour the obvious. If they accelerated to get away from the fast section of the drift which they had assumed was closing with the slow component surrounding them, and it turned out that the section they had been charting was actually the fast section, then the slow section must be ahead and they would be accelerating straight into trouble, because they would hit it with a speed composed of the closing velocity of the two components plus the product of *Descartes'* own acceleration.

That would not be a safe speed to hit anything.

"I had assumed that this was the slow component," Gregory said, looking coldly towards the prisoner. Caulfield, who had been present during the conversation with Keatly, stared back uneasily. Viciously, he went on, "Let us say, rather, that the manner in which the data was presented led me to believe so."

"Any comment, Mister Caulfield?"

The ex-Engineer was scared, Gregory realised suddenly, deathly scared. His shiny, immobile face was sweating and his knuckles were white as he gripped the sides of his chair. His eyes were looking everywhere except at the radar screens. He shook his head.

"I should have known that the data you gave me was too good to be a product of unaided memory," Gregory said self-accusingly, "and that you must have deliberately remembered it for all these years, and probably altered it as well, for reasons of your own. What those reasons were—"

"It boils down to this," Keatly's voice interrupted from the wall speaker, "we either run ahead or fall back, either of which might be the wrong guess. But you've another ten hours in which to decide, according to the data we have . . ."

"If my guess is right," Gregory cut in, still too furiously angry at the prisoner for the other's extreme fear to have communicated itself to him, "we don't have any time at all."

It was approximately three seconds later than Nolan said in an oddly hushed voice, "Look at the reducer!"

Along the forward edge of the reducer screen a bright, deadly image was taking shape. The swarm which they had finished charting had been a misty, insubstantial trace—*this* was like a dense, irregular-shaped star cluster which was coming into view. Each bright point of light represented a body of many pounds in mass, and they were clumped tightly together and coming fast.

"Swap ends! Decelerate!" Gregory called urgently, then contradicted himself. "No, suits first, it's nearly on top of us . . .!"

"You gave us bum data!" Hartman yelled, swinging round on Caulfield with bloody murder in his eye. The prisoner shook his head numbly, apparently hypnotised by the reducer screen he stammered, "No. I—I mean yes, a little. But I didn't know about this—I wouldn't try to hide a thing like *this* . . .!"

"Shut up, both of you!" Gregory snapped, then: "Keatly, get that eggshell of yours out of here. Keep your radio open and recorders going. Move! Nolan, rotate us one-eighty then give me full emergency thrust. We've got to slow down . . .!"

Ponderously the big ship swapped ends and the reactor built up to its maximum of three-quarters-G thrust. This would check their speed considerably, but not nearly enough. Meanwhile the return of weight aided in the donning of spacesuits. During the five eternal minutes which it took him to put on his suit and help Caulfield seal his, Gregory's eyes never left the reducer screen. The image was of a small, dense globular star cluster fully formed at the edge of the screen and sliding slowly and remorselessly towards *Descartes*. But the slowness was only apparent, because the screen represented ten thousand miles of space.

"Straps!" barked Gregory when everyone was sealed. "Nolan, chemical engines. Four-Gs for five minutes . . ."

Gregory was rammed down into his seat as the landing motors flared out, augmenting the thrust of the long-range nuclear drive. With four-and-three-quarters-Gs sitting on him Gregory fought to stay conscious, to do the muscle tensing and relaxing exercises which were supposed to equalise body pressures and allow a man to stay at least semi-conscious under high-G. He didn't pass out, quite, but neither could he see the screen.

After what seemed much, much longer than five minutes it stopped. With clearing vision came a splitting, banging headache. Gregory took one look at the screen and snapped, "Not nearly enough. Same again."

The second time it took longer for his vision to clear. On the screen the leading edge of the new swarm was almost touching the centre spot, which meant that it was not more than a few hundred miles away. Beside him Nolan's nose was bleeding—but luckily not onto his visor—and the acceleration pressure had made a mottled horror of Caulfield's rebuilt face. Gregory made a croaking sound, then cleared his throat and tried again.

"Kill the landing motors," he said. "Blow the fuel lines clear and seal venturis. Maintain reactor thrust."

Descartes continued to brake towards the rapidly approaching swarm at the maximum thrust of her power pile. Three-

quarters-G wasn't much, but it was a reasonably safe method of deceleration when a collision was imminent. The chemical landing motors, although much more powerful over short periods, were not safe in these circumstances. If a meteor was to rupture a fuel tank while that half mile long blow torch was squirting out of their tail, *Descartes* would go up like a miniature nova.

The bright, tight, sparkling globe—Gregory had never before seen anything like it—had reached the centre of the reducer. Gregory found himself holding his breath, and his jaw ached with the intensity with which he clenched his teeth. He began to think about the inadequacy of the routine safety drills. True he had closed the tanks, cleared the fuel lines between them and the motors, and closed the venturi orifice. But a flukey hit could still open up the ship in the wrong place, bludgeon a path between the fuel tanks and that still white-hot venturi . . .

The first hit took them amidships and the meteor ploughed through the hull plating almost parallel with their long axis, and passed out via a corner of the control-room. Gregory saw the wall-plating tear apart, a radar screen shattered and some lights went out on the control panel while others burned an urgent red. He guessed that the meteor had possessed roughly the weight, velocity and destructive force of a three-pounder armour piercing shell, and that all things considered they had been very lucky.

His suit creaked faintly as the last of the air rushed into space. Gregory switched to radio and said, "Nolan, check the reactor."

"Thrust steady at three-quarters-G," Nolan reported in a shaky voice. "No apparent damage . . ."

The second impact was unheard but their suits jolted to the shock of it, and it did not pass upwards though the control-room as had the first. Obviously the ship had been knocked into a spin. Gregory gave orders to check it just as the third hit occurred.

Analysing that sharp double-shock, Gregory decided that their three-quarters-G was beginning to show effect—their speed with regard to the swarm was decreasing steadily. And had the meteoric material been the normal small stuff which they had been expecting, he knew that at this speed it would have bounced harmlessly off the hull. But it wasn't. They were riddled and battered into scrap, and Gregory still couldn't imagine what those small, ultra-dense bodies could be.

The floor erupted beside him and a smashing, agonising shock struck upwards through his feet. Caulfield's acceleration chair jerked up and over as its rear support was torn away, and toppled across him. Gregory instinctively threw up his arms to protect his visor. There was another soundless crash and the lights went out.

An eerie, greenish glow from the reducer screen—the only piece of radar equipment still working—made the control-room resemble a badly lit nightmare. There were soft, rounded shadows of figures in spacesuits, hard, jagged shadows of ruptured plating, and the shadowy, angular lines of trailing plumbing. He couldn't see anything, really, and yet he saw too much. Gregory felt suddenly, blindly terrified. He wanted to switch on the standby lighting, but the weight of Caulfield on his chest made it almost impossible for him to move. Then all at once he didn't want the lights on for fear of what he would find.

"Check the reactor," he said harshly, automatically.

Right then he didn't give a damn about the reactor, but he desperately wanted to know that he was not all alone.

"W-we're losing thrust, sir," Nolan's voice replied. He, too, sounded overwhelmingly glad that there was someone there. He added, "I don't know why—most of my control and information circuits have gone. Will I shut down?"

"No," said Gregory, taking a good, firm grip on himself. "Not until we match velocities with this stuff. Watch through the port—this stuff is so blasted dense you can *see* it go past! And when it stops moving, cut everything." He paused, then; "Hartman, are you all right?"

"I can't see," said Hartman.

"Neither can I. Caulfield?"

"Yes."

Never, thought Gregory in awe, *have four people been so lucky*. Then aloud he said, "Caulfield, get off my chest."

While the prisoner was disentangling himself from the wreckage of his acceleration chair the ship took another hit. But the shock was not nearly so severe this time, and from the feel of it Gregory knew that that one had not penetrated the hull. Then, a few minutes after he had the emergency lights on, all weight disappeared. They had stopped moving with respect to the swarm. Deceleration had ceased, for the moment they were safe.

"Nolan, go below and check the pile," Gregory said quickly. "Wear a radiation card and take a geiger. Hartman, start listing the damage. Start with . . . Nolan!"

The Lieutenant hadn't moved. He started slightly when Gregory raised his voice, then pointed towards the viewport.

"There's a spacesuit out there," he said shakily. "About fifty yards away. It . . . it must be Captain Warren . . .!"

"Forget him," said Hartman bitterly. "He can't do us any more harm now, he's done all that he could do already."

"No!" Gregory contradicted suddenly, then went on, "Nolan, check the reactor. Hartman, shoot a magnet at that suit out there and reel him in. Move!"

With the ship in its present chaotic condition using time to fish for an eleven years dead body seemed pointless, and the two officers showed their surprise. But they had not been watching Caulfield when the body had been spotted. The look in the ex-Engineer's eyes had been something Gregory had never seen before and hoped never to see again. Somehow he knew that when that body out there was brought in, all things would become plain.

Chapter Six

Nolan reported twice during the next few minutes, saying that he was finding it heavy going—the central well which led to the reactor room was partly blocked with wreckage which he was having to clear away. He added that one of the chemical fuel tanks had been holed. All around him were steaming, iridescent globules of fuel which looked rather pretty. The radiation level was rising, also . . .

"Get down to that reactor, quick!" Gregory snapped. "And don't stop to admire the scenery!"

He was being unfair to the lieutenant, Gregory knew. But there was a very real possibility that the power pile might decide at any minute to become a slow atomic bomb. He could make amends later, if there was a later.

"I did cook the figures," Caulfield burst out suddenly. The words rushed from his mouth faster and more high pitched, like a gramophone record speeding up. "But only slightly. I wanted you to go through the swarm without stopping, without finding *him*. But I didn't expect this to happen. Honest, I don't know what caused—"

"Shut up!" said Gregory viciously. He was thinking of his lovely ship and the effect those slightly cooked figures had had

on it. But before he could say anything else Hartman came swimming into the control-room with the spacesuited body in tow. He also had a shapeless grey something in his hand which he pushed gently towards Gregory.

"I found that below," he growled. "It must have been one of the later ones which punctured the hull but hadn't enough momentum left to go right through. It explains a lot of things, doesn't it, sir?"

It was a small, dense, roughly cubical block of lead of the type used as shielding on spaceship reactors.

Suddenly Gregory remembered the prisoner telling him that *Sunflower* had made Ganymede with fuel to spare, that they must have lightened ship too much. Looking at the body Hartman had brought in, Gregory thought, *You fool! You brave, noble, criminally stupid fool!*

This had been the man who had taken a lethal dose of radiation while repairing *Sunflower's* reactor, then had further lightened ship by removing his dying body from it. But even that had not been enough for him. After fixing the pile—reducing its operating volume and rebuilding the shielding around it—there must have been upwards of a hundred lead bricks lying around loose, and these he had tossed out as well. Some repair shop, thought Gregory angrily, had been paid plenty to keep quiet about the condition of *Sunflower's* pile . . .

"I didn't know he threw away shielding bricks . . .!" Caulfield began, then stopped as he saw Gregory start unscrewing the helmet and shoulder piece of the body's suit.

Gregory's actions were nearly automatic. The dry, brittle, sun-blackened face which he uncovered did not bother him too much, he had seen many others just like it. And while there was very little doubt as to who the man was, checking his ID disc was also automatic. As he drew it out Hartman spoke, but not to him.

"What's the matter with you, Caulfield," the Lieutenant said derisively, "seen a ghost?"

With the identity disc cupped in his gauntleted hand, Gregory thought, *Yes, Hartman, he has. He has seen a ghost.* Because the body, according to the ID disc, was one James Andrew Caulfield!

"Captain!" Nolan's voice broke in on them urgently. "We're in a mess. The pile's overheating—large sections of shielding knocked lose and the geiger's gone mad! Total melt-down in about half an hour, I'd say, then blooie—"

"Be specific!" said Gregory sharply. "What is the position down there exactly?"

The last piece of the Caulfield puzzle had just fallen neatly into place, but there was no time to think about it. As Nolan began putting in the fine details of the picture in the reactor room, Gregory found himself thinking that it would have been a good thing if one of *Sunflower's* shielding bricks had hit him as well as the pile. He would have been where good space captains go, with no necessity of pretending to be fast thinking and resourceful and the type who fights to the last gasp.

The position looked hopeless.

"I'll send Hartman down to give you a hand," Gregory said, to give himself time to think. But Nolan didn't give him any time at all, he said, "No . . .!"

Apparently there was wreckage blocking the approach to the power pile so that only one person at a time could get close enough to work it. This was further complicated by the high level of radiation there and the fact that most of the long tongs and other handling equipment had also been damaged. What there was left, if it was to be of use at all, would mean going dangerously close to the pile.

"Use it," said Gregory, "we've no other choice. See what you can do in the next ten minutes, then I'll spell you. The radiation is too high for continuous working, but with three of us taking it in shifts—"

"Four," said the prisoner suddenly.

"Right, four then." He looked hard at the ex-Engineer, then added, "But I want no stupid heroics. You will all wear radiation cards, and if they start turning blue you pull out of there immediately. Understood?"

Hartman nodded. The prisoner said, "Can I go to my cabin? I've got a good luck charm there."

"Go ahead," said Gregory impatiently. Somehow he had not thought of the other as the superstitious type, but he had too much on his mind to wonder about it for long.

The approach to the reactor was by a long, narrow well about two feet in diameter. A metal ladder projected a few inches from its inner wall so as to give a secure grip for hands and feet. Gregory could see that a meteorite had passed diagonally through the lower end, ploughing through the rungs, wall-plating and supports and practically sealing it off with wreckage. But the well was passable, because at the other

side of the tangle he could see Nolan's legs. He ordered the Lieutenant to back out, then wriggled forward to take his place.

Nolan had set up mirrors and clamped the long tongs onto their bracket, which had been loosened badly by the meteor. Gregory could see clearly what the trouble was, but with the equipment at their disposal it would be a miracle if they fixed it.

The pile had been struck twice. One had been a glancing blow which had peeled off a large section of the outer shielding—there were about fifty of the small, interlocking lead bricks drifting about the room—and the other had been a solid puncture. There was only one opening, so the body which had done the damage must still be inside the pile. The immediate, most urgent danger was caused by several of the loose shielding bricks having become jammed against the damper rod stops. All the pile damper rods were fully out in the maximum thrust position, they were stuck there, and the reactor was steadily turning itself into a slow atomic bomb.

Descartes' acceleration had been cut by interrupting the flow of working fluid to the pile, and Gregory thought desperately of checking the meltdown by giving it something to work on again. But that would only have delayed the blow-up slightly, if the sudden renewal of thrust at three-quarters-G didn't shake the reactor apart and bring about the explosion there and then.

With careful haste Gregory checked the four tong controls, two for rotating the jointed head and two for closing and locking the clamps. They were so loose that he knew that they would slip more often than hold. Using the mirrors to guide him he brought the head of the tongs against the score or so of lead bricks which were jammed between the damper rod stops and the wall of the pile. With frantic patience he began to worry at them. But the metal teeth of the clamps could not get a grip, they slipped again and again. The sweat ran into Gregory's eyes and his suit was like an oven.

The suddenly a brick moved.

Gregory forced himself to do nothing for all of ten seconds, relaxing both hands and nerves for the effort to come. Carefully he eased the clamps around the loose brick and tightened them, trying to take up the slack in the joints and loose supporting bracket. Then he took hold of the controls, muttered a prayer that was almost blasphemous in its fervency, and pulled.

The brick came away. Two others adjoining it drifted free and he was able to poke a third one loose. The others were jammed as tightly as ever. But he had accomplished something.

"Try Number Six," he told Nolan.

Cleared of obstructions Number Six damper rod slid into the pile. With one rod in the time to meltdown would be delayed ten or fifteen minutes, which wasn't much considering there were nine others still to be freed and this had been the easiest one.

"Your time's up, sir," Nolan said warningly, and added, "Caulfield's waiting to relieve you."

Gregory took a last, brief look through the mirrors. He thought that if he could just go in there for half an hour and use his hands instead of a sloppy pair of tongs he could free the damper rods, gather up those loose, floating bricks and rebuild the shielding. But there were two holes in the shielding big enough to jump through and the radiation level within the room was such that he could not risk even two minutes inside.

And if he should take such a risk his officers would feel obliged to take similar risks, and everybody in space knew where that course led. It had not been the first time that officers had saved their ships only to die on the way home with radiation poisoning—blind, raving, with their hair falling out and bleeding through the pores. Gregory would prefer a nice, quick atomic explosion every time.

"You might be feeling responsible for all this," Gregory said harshly as he passed the prisoner in the well, "and you *are* responsible. But if you get any stupid ideas during the next ten minutes, forget them. Hear me?"

"I understand," said the prisoner bitterly. "You've suddenly realised my true value and don't want to lose me."

Gregory wanted to tell him that it wasn't that at all, and that he had other, unselfish reasons for wanting the other to stay alive. But there wasn't time to start that sort of argument, and if Gregory had done so he would have badly confused Nolan and Hartman and probably distracted them from their work. The two officers did not know yet that the ID he had found on the eleven years dead body identified it as James Andrew Caulfield, so that the man they had come to know as Caulfield must be someone else. Gregory thought he knew who, but he also knew that this was no time to be going into a long-winded Sherlock Holmes act, so for the time being the prisoner's name remained Caulfield and he could think about Captain Gregory what he liked!

Chapter Seven

Angrily, Gregory kicked himself in the direction of the control-room, passing Hartman who was splicing a severed bundle of wiring which bore the reactor colour code. Hartman had been working to good effect because he found Nolan bent over a panel which was again comfortably full of indicator lights. He was about to compliment the junior lieutenant when Caulfield's voice forestalled him.

"Try Number Eight and Nine."

Nolan's gauntleted fingers stabbed at the control panel and two red indicators flickered and became green. "Good man!" he burst out, then to the Captain, "This gives us another twenty minutes to work in. We might be able to do it."

"Caulfield!" snapped Gregory, "I told you not to enter the pile room . . .!"

"I didn't," the prisoner broke in. "I was lucky, that's all. You and Nolan must have loosened a lot of stuff for me. My card is still a nice bright red."

"I don't believe you," said Gregory. "Hartman, go down and check. Caulfield, meet him at the end of the well."

He heard the prisoner muttering to himself and Hartman's heavy breathing as he pulled himself sternwards. Less than a minute later the Lieutenant reported, "Red like he says, sir. He's clean."

"Carry on," said Gregory, feeling foolish.

His eyes were caught by the reducer screen and the dense, sparkling cloud centering it. There was a large blurred smudge of light on the fringe of the swarm which could only be Keatly's ship, or the wreck of Keatly's ship. Until that moment he had been too busy to think of *Vixen*. He asked Nolan if he had tried to contact her and received the reply that *Descartes'* transmitter was a mass of scrap. Gregory asked about their standby receiver. Nolan admitted shamefacedly that he hadn't thought of that.

"Try it," said Gregory, "maybe he's trying to call us." A few seconds later Keatly's voice came through his 'phones.

". . . If there is anyone left alive, answer please. If you are receiving me but are not able to reply, light a flare—I have a telescope on you. *Vixen* to *Descartes* . . ."

Gregory laughed suddenly. "Do what the man says, Nolan," he said.

". . . Hearing me but can't reply," Keatly was droning out, 'light a flare . . . Oh, my eyes !

"I'm glad somebody's alive," he went on in a relieved voice. "My ship is slightly damaged. A few control circuits cut—it will take about four hours to fix and get across to you. I'll have to go easy with this heavy stuff floating about . . ."

"Nolan!" said Gregory urgently. "Start digging into that receiver—I want it revamped to transmit. It will be weak but should reach him at this range. Tell him our pile could blow anytime. Tell him to stay clear . . .!"

"Try Number Three," said the prisoner.

Nolan pushed a button and another light changed from red to green. The Lieutenant said, "But sir, we're freeing the pile. Why not let *Vixen* come over—"

"We've pushed the blow-up back an hour," said Gregory sharply. "Up to now that's all that we're sure of. Do as you're told."

As the exchange inside the ship ceased the voice of Keatly gained prominence again. The Commander was saying, ". . . And I've identified those heavy meteors as shielding bricks from *Sunflower*. You realise what this means? With the second component of the swarm so thoroughly seeded with this heavy stuff, the gravitic attraction of the pieces has overcome the original scatter effect. This part of the swarm is *condensing*! Therefore its danger to shipping is a reducing one, and in another couple of decades it will have shrunk so much that we could load it on a ship and take it away.

"But we can talk about this later," Keatly ended. "I have full data recorded on the drift, which lacks only TR corroboration, so don't worry if your equipment suffered. Be seeing you."

The last syllable had scarcely faded when Caulfield's voice returned. "Try Five," he said.

Nolan touched the control which would send Number Five damper rod back into the pile. The light beside it flickered, but continued to burn red. Nolan looked up quickly at the Captain, and Gregory barked, "Caulfield, what's happening!"

The prisoner reported that Number Five had been cleared where it projected outside the pile, but when it had gone one quarter of the way in it had stuck. The trouble was inside the reactor. Caulfield had an idea how to fix it but his time was nearly up. Could have another five minutes?

"No," said Gregory.

"But I'm getting into the swing of this thing," Caulfield protested. "I've done better than the rest of you put together. Let me have five minutes, my card's still red . . ."

"Very well," said Gregory.

He wondered briefly what had happened to the supreme authority of the Captain on this ship, which led him straight into thinking about the present state of the vessel itself. Even if the pile was made safe, and that looked extremely doubtful since Caulfield's last report, the ship had taken an awful beating. It would take a week at least to repair and check the wiring, go over the fuel plumbing and render the ship air-tight again. But he had the horrible feeling that time was running out, that there were only minutes left instead of hours or days. Gregory felt tense and cold and there was a highly unpleasant feeling in the pit of his stomach, and he realised suddenly that these symptoms were due to the plain, old-fashioned fear of dying.

It was then that Gregory felt a series of tiny shocks being transmitted through the arm-rests of his chair. Almost querulously he asked, "Caulfield, what's happening now?"

"I'm moving the tongs . . . further up . . . to get more reach," the prisoner said between pauses for breath. "As things are I can't . . . get into the pile."

Gregory began to sweat suddenly, because the other was quite definitely lying. Those tongs could *not* be moved as he had said, they weren't designed that way. But why was he lying? *What was he doing down there?*

A little earlier Gregory would have thought that he knew the answers to those questions. That was why he had insisted on radiation card checks and had stressed to the prisoner the undesirability of doing anything stupid. Because a man who had been responsible for creating a deadly menace to navigation which had already cost many lives and wrecked two ships might have feelings of guilt about the matter. He might feel that some atonement was due, and that taking chances with hard radiation might help to square accounts. For the prisoner was responsible all right, completely and damnably responsible.

For eleven years, Gregory now knew, he had been hiding his true identity. All that time the penalties for the crime he had committed had grown in severity and his fear of discovery must have mounted in proportion. And he had continued to

hide his identity right up to the last moment, by refusing TR and giving false data on the second component of the swarm so that they would pass through it without finding the body. But the eleven years dead body had been found, and with it the dog-tag which identified it as James Andrew Caulfield.

Most definitely the prisoner must be feeling afraid and guilty and altogether pretty horrible. Because he wasn't *Sunflower's* ex-Engineer, he was her ex-Captain, Warren.

Quickly Gregory left the control-room, signalling for Nolan to be quiet. Still without speaking he tapped Hartman's helmet and motioned for him to follow. Together they descended to the well. They found it packed loosely with wreckage—which explained the vibrations Gregory had felt and which the prisoner had ascribed to moving the tongs—so that while they couldn't pass along it they could see its entire length quite clearly. The prisoner was not to be seen, which meant he had to be in the reactor room.

"He's jammed that stuff into the well by hand," Gregory said urgently. "We can move it the same way. Hurry, we're running out of time!"

"Stay away from me!" Caulfield-Warren said sharply. It was followed by the voice of Nolan asking plaintively, "What are you all talking about? What's happening . . .?"

But there was no time to explain. Gregory seized a piece of loose plating and began working it free, his desperation sending a flood of mad, inconsequential thoughts roaring through his mind. There was that genii in the Arabian Nights story, the one locked up in a bottle, who promised himself during his first thousand years of captivity that he would reward his deliverer with all the riches of the world, and during the next thousand years that he would kill him . . .

Warren had been a Captain well-liked by his men, and headed for trial, disgrace and possibly prison. Then his face and hands had been burned in a fuel line explosion, obliterating features and fingerprints alike, and the dying ship's Engineer had jumped into space. So Warren had taken Caulfield's identity and the crew had gone along with it. And in the Earth hospital Mrs. Warren had discovered that she wasn't a widow after all and had re-married her supposedly dead husband.

And Gregory had been thinking in terms of a murky private life!

"Sir!" Nolan's voice burst on them. "He's over-riding my controls! Withdrawing those four working damper rods by manual! What . . .!"

"I'm trying out something," the prisoner said impatiently. "Shut up and let me think."

"But with all the dampers out again . . . meltdown . . . she could blow in ten minutes . . .!" Nolan protested, nearly incoherent. "Run them in again . . ."

"Caulfield, stop that!" Gregory called sharply, the name slipping out by force of habit. "Do as he says. And come out of there at once!"

There was no reply.

The second thousand years . . .

Captain Warren had been an intelligent, sensitive, professionally competent man. During those years of hiding he must have constantly watched for news of shipping losses caused by the swarm he had created. That would have made him feel bad, and his promise to his wife to stay out of space would have hurt him, too. And the steadily increasing feeling against spacemen with dirty habits—especially Captains with dirty habits—which amounted almost to blind, killing hatred. Fear and frustration and guilt, mounting and growing for eleven long years.

Too much pressure could break a mind as well as bend it, Gregory knew, and guilty fear could change to a sudden blind, unreasoning hatred of its persecutors. The finding of the real Caulfield's body must have been the factor which knocked Warren over the hump, and the ex-Captain's persecutors were the crew of *Descartes* . . .

Gregory pulled and tore at the wreckage, frantically unaware of the danger he ran of a suit puncture. There was a madman in the reactor room. Their lives depended on getting him out and undoing the damage he might have done, *quick*.

Seven minutes later the prisoner appeared at the other end of the well. He said, "It's all right, gentlemen, I'll come quietly . . ."

"The pile's been deactivated, sir," Nolan's voice broke in exultantly. "We're safe!"

And so they were, thought Gregory soberly, but not all of them. The prisoner was still twenty feet from Hartman and himself, and Gregory's radiation counter was already having hysterics.

Working at top speed they set up a temporary lock outside one of the undamaged compartments and peeled him out of his suit ; he had taken enough radiation already without re-radiation from his ' hot ' suit adding to it. In the process they discovered that he must have been entering the pile room from the very start, because the ' radiation card ' he wore was nothing but a piece of red cardboard cut from the back of a notebook . . .

" So that was your lucky charm," Gregory muttered, and left shortly afterwards to find out if Nolan had jury-rigged a transmitter yet. He had, and Gregory's instructions to Keatly were urgent and brief.

Vixen would rendezvous with them as soon as possible, take their prisoner aboard and proceed to the hospital on Titan at maximum speed and without regard to fuel economy considerations. *Descartes'* reactor was badly damaged but there was no immediate danger, and *Vixen* could leave them some of her remote-handling equipment which would aid in the repairs. They would be able to make it home under their own power, but slowly, which was why Gregory was transferring the prisoner to *Vixen*.

Then he went to see Warren again.

" For a while back there I thought you were intending to blow us all up," Gregory began awkwardly as he opened his faceplate. " I mean, pulling out all the damper rods . . . "

" I needed room to clear the blockage inside," said the prisoner shortly, and turned his face away.

There were words which Gregory wanted to say, words which were difficult for one of his character and background, and the other was not making it any easier for him. He tried again :

" The hospital on Titan is good—they specialise in this sort of thing, you know. You weren't in there for more than twenty minutes. Provided we get you to them quickly, and we will, you stand a very good chance. You'll see, in a few months time I'll be out to badger you into a TR session—"

" How very like you," said Warren tiredly. Physically there was no change in him yet, but that was because his injuries were in the blood-producing marrow of his bones and other non-obvious places. Already he must feel—psychosomatically as yet—the developing lassitude of advanced leukemia. Dully, he went on, " I honestly believe the data comes first with you, and the kudos you'll get for tracking down the supposedly dead Captain of *Sunflower*—"

"Listen, Caulfield!" Gregory began angrily, then stopped.

He was thinking that the subconscious mind was a funny thing. When the real Caulfield's body had been taken aboard he had continued to call the prisoner Caulfield, and later when there had been time to tell Nolan and Hartman about it he had continued to hold off—when ordinarily he should have been bursting to tell them of his discovery. He also thought about the circumstances of the *Sunflower* accident and of how Warren must have suffered because of it in the eleven years which followed. Finally he remembered the business with *Descartes'* reactor and thought that his own subconscious was a bit of a softie, and decided that actions always did speak louder than words.

Quickly he fastened the ID taken from Caulfield's body around the prisoner's neck. "Good luck, Mr. Caulfield," he said stiffly, then left.

That dog-tag had been the proof that the prisoner was not Caulfield but Warren. If Gregory had held onto it he might have weakened sometime at the thought of the glory which would accrue from turning in a Captain, and decided to tell all. So the only thing to do had been to give it to the man calling himself Caulfield. Either that or throw it away.

Gregory might be guilty of turning a blind eye and of committing various other sins of omission, but throwing things away into space was one of the things which were just not done.

—James White

British Convention—Easter 1960

Britain's major science fiction convention, sponsored by the British Science Fiction Association, will be held over Easter, April 15th to 18th, either in London or Kettering. Saturday and Sunday will be the two main business sessions. Attending this year's convention as one of the Guests of Honour and also as official TAFF delegate, will be Don Ford of Ohio, USA, the originator of this unique idea for the yearly exchange of one s-f fan across the Atlantic.

For further details send s.a.e. to The Newsletter Editor, 14 Bennington Street, Cheltenham, Glos.

Late news and further details will be contained in the March and April issues of *New Worlds*.



THE READERS' SPACE

Dear Mr. Carnell,

I don't know if you remember J. T. McIntosh's guest editorial in *Science Fantasy* No. 9. In case you don't, I'll say that one of the things he said was that s-f editors keep hollering for new concepts, then send back the stories that include them on the grounds that they are not good enough. As a result, he implies, s-f is getting stale and repetitious. He seems to feel that new concepts are important enough so that an editor should accept a bad story with a new concept over a mediocre one without. Otherwise s-f will die out in a welter of its own discarded concepts.

I'll agree with him that new ideas in s-f are very important. But I don't want to see the top s-f magazines publishing bad stories just because they've got something new in them. And most of the new ideas *do* appear in not-particularly-good stories. Dilemma: what should you do?

I have a suggestion. It seems to me there is a maldistribution of material. Poor (would-be) writers have good ideas and the good writers, who could use them, are often void of them. But the only way that the good writers can get hold of the gimmicks they need is from the stories already in the magazines where the bad stories with the good ideas never go.

Thus far I have said little that McIntosh didn't, but there's a point to all this.

It is no secret that editors have before now suggested ideas to writers which have been turned into good stories. Still, editors, too, are often short of ideas. But the readers aren't. So I would like to suggest that you set up an idea-clearing house for writers. Any readers who have good gimmicks but cannot write them into decent stories could send them in to you, and you could pass them on to the authors who might or might not be able to use them. That way they would be in circulation, which is what really matters.

The reader who suggested the idea could be rewarded by a personal letter of thanks from the writer who used it, maybe

an autographed copy of the book or magazine in which the story incorporating it appeared, and the pleasure of seeing his own personal gimmick in print. Since the ideas wouldn't have to be used, and you would still get hold of many good ones that might otherwise be missed, I don't think you could lose. All it would take is a small notice somewhere in the magazine, and I don't think that it would increase the volume of mail that you would have to treat by very much.

And it might produce some good stories which you would otherwise miss. How about it?

Julian Reid,
Victoria, B.C., Canada.

(There is a great deal of worth in your suggestion, Mr. Reid, and I am quite willing to try the idea out. We receive scores of stories each month containing good ideas but which are hopelessly written. Something better in the way of recompense would be necessary for those readers supplying the ideas—or even complete plots. I would suggest up to half a guinea for 'gimmick ideas' and up to two guineas for plots, depending upon length and usability—if and when used. And here, I am afraid, the editor's decision would have to be final, in view of the possible duplication of ideas and also the fact that even the regular authors are just as likely to come up with similar plots and ideas. In this case, the readers will have to trust the editor. —Ed.).

Dear Mr. Carnell,

I would like to say how much I appreciate your three magazines, which, to my mind, have the American market beaten wholesale. I would place *New Worlds* in first place, followed closely by *Science Fantasy*, with *Science Fiction Adventures* bringing up the rear. The latter I don't think has really had time to mature, but when it does, it will perhaps top the lot. I feel the American market would do well to study the success of these magazines of yours, and they might perhaps do something to combat the present slump over there.

Naturally, of course, your magazines are not perfect—I don't expect you would want anyone to say so if they did not think so. Nevertheless, keep up the good work you have begun so well and long may you continue with every success.

Derek Blyth,
Teddington, Middx.

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